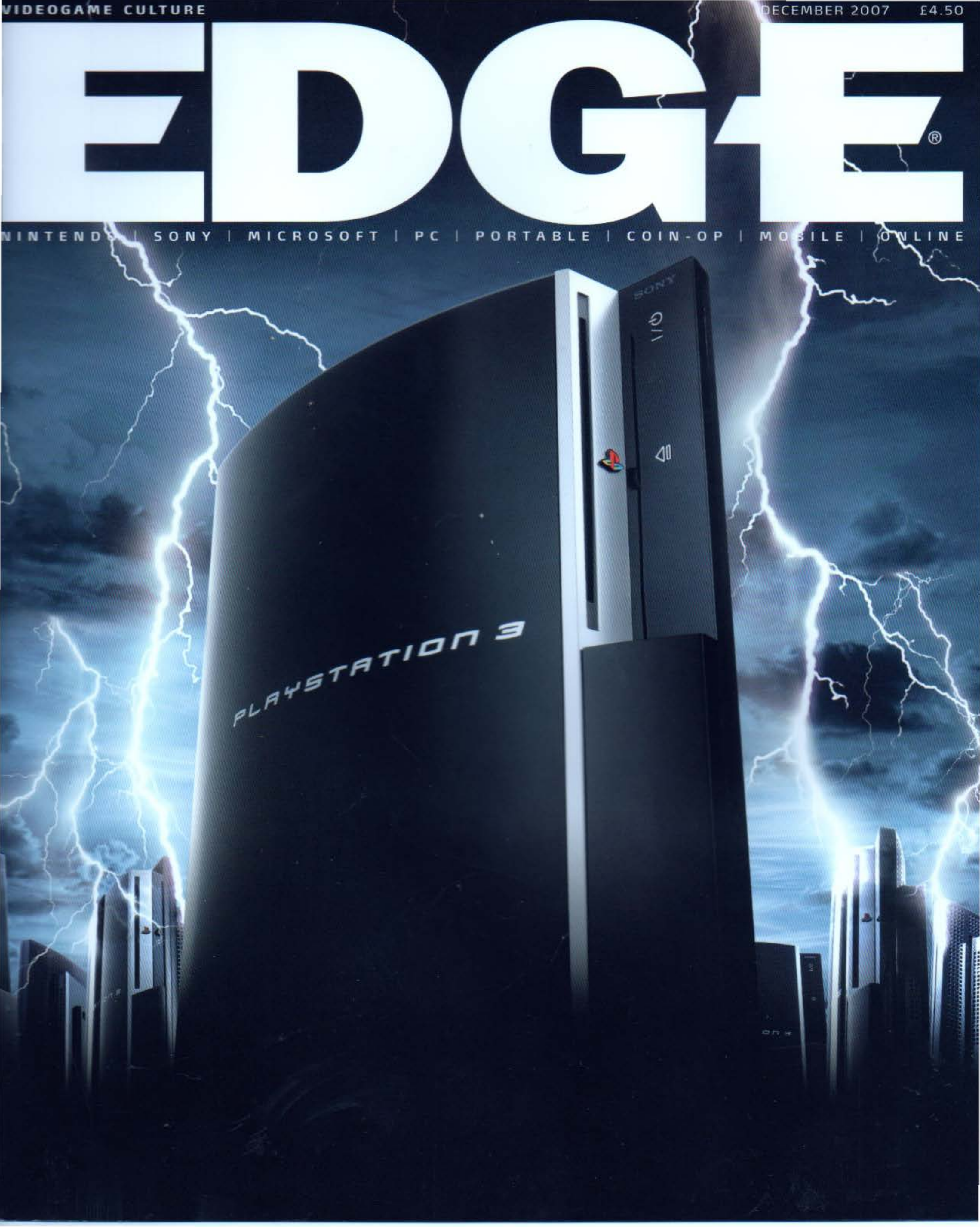
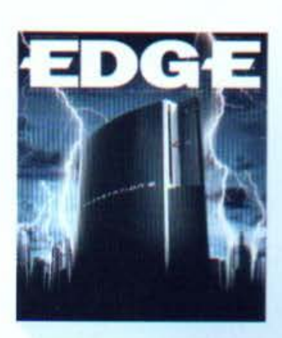

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If everyone involved were to discuss, openly and honestly, the state of videogaming today, it would have to be concluded that the next generation – that is, the one we're currently playing with – arrived before it was ready. How else can the worldwide Xbox 360 meltdown that led to Microsoft issuing extended three-year warranties be explained? Is that the mark of a high-performance console that has undergone enough testing before being released into the marketplace?

And is there any other way to explain the fact that, having originally poured so much scorn on Microsoft for offering multiple iterations of its console hardware, Sony has bumbled its way along to the point where, less than a year after it sold its first PlayStation 3, it now offers the console in four different flavours?

Of course, Sony had to make its move into the market when it did because Microsoft had already set the ball rolling, and then... Well, and then the circle was complete.

Meanwhile, with Wii demand continuing to outstrip supply, has Nintendo ever looked in such a positive position? While industry analysts attempt to pick between which manufacturer – Sony or Microsoft – will manage to sell the most hardware units this Christmas, Nintendo just has to tip back its chair and resign itself to only shifting everything it can possibly get out there on to store shelves. That once-ridiculed policy of using revamped GameCube hardware no longer seems to be quite so out of touch.

In this issue we talk to the managing director of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe to find out how, with its stripped-down architecture and new pricepoint, he thinks PlayStation 3's fortunes are set to change (see p70), and look at some of its big, and not so big, upcoming titles.

We also look to Japan (p60), and take a snapshot of the territory as it exists today to see how its market has evolved, and consider the implications for the wider industry.

If all that seems a little serious, there's a slightly spectacular new release reviewed in this issue, too. 



EDGE

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"Yeah. And now you're gonna die, wearing that stupid little hat. How does it feel?"







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Animal Crossing goes MMO

For all its current domination of gaming sales and headlines, there's one area where Nintendo has had little impact: online gaming. That's about to change



A Japanese source has confirmed to **Edge** that the upcoming Wii iteration of *Animal Crossing* is set to be a social networking MMO. It's a natural move for the series, which is hugely popular worldwide. In fact, *Animal Crossing* has become one of Nintendo's most-loved and top-selling franchises (with over 7m copies sold), particularly in Japan. Famously, Nintendo already refers to the title as a 'communications game' rather than a videogame, and playing already depends on real-world timekeeping, seasonal weather features, social conventions, and economic interactions. In other words, *Animal Crossing* has always been the perfect MMO concept.

The game has yet to be officially announced (although Nintendo has at least confirmed that an *Animal Crossing* game is in development for the Wii) so details are naturally thin on the ground right now. But there are some indications of where the game will take the series: Katsuya Eguchi, head of development for the project, has made relatively non-committal noises thus far, but in an interview as far back as last year hinted that connection to mobile phones and PCs (for basic functions such as messages) would be included. *Animal Crossing*'s earlier iterations already feature travelling between towns, the ability for players to live in the same town (though not to play in it at the same time), transfer of certain features between console and the GBA, and the ability to design your own clothing – and then sell it.

Famously, Nintendo already refers to Animal Crossing as a 'communications game' rather than a videogame, and playing already depends on real-world timekeeping and social conventions

Of similar import could be the imminent arrival of an official DS flash card reader, which will initially be available to allow Nintendo to re-sell its back catalogue of Game Boy and Game Boy Color games. The uncontrollable homebrew and piracy communities that use the DS rely on similar devices for their more nefarious ends, but this should, in the long term, allow Nintendo to exercise some control over at least the former through the simple step of offering a path to publisher-supported content. Compared to the slightly vague WiiWare proposition, this has the possibility to revolutionise homebrew development – at least in terms of distribution and the possibility of mainstream success – but how far the notoriously controlling Japanese giant will allow that community the creative freedom it requires to flourish will only be seen in practice.

These are two moves that might seem insignificant in the whirlwinds of blockbuster AAA releases set to dominate Christmas headlines, but grandmaster Nintendo is already thinking several moves ahead, and these two announcements, when officially made, should only consolidate its winning stance.



Sony opens, then Nintendo shows the way at TGS

This year's Tokyo Game Show proves Nintendo's dominance – despite it not even attending

From September 20-23 the 2007 Tokyo Game Show took over the Makuhari Messe. This year's theme, emblazoned on the official guide book, website and occasionally throughout the venue was 'Link up, reach out, to the world'. It seems this has already happened, so few were the surprises and curiosities on show: TGS is now an event with an international focus, bringing industry types together in the terrifyingly named 'Business Solutions Area', rather than a Japanese game show which foreign media attend.

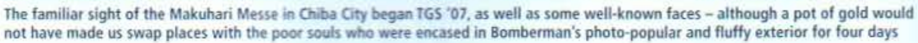
If there was an unofficial theme, however, then it might be expressed as 'Look at what Nintendo has done, and copy it'. Despite Nintendo's absence from TGS '07, its machines dominated the playable booths and tables with titles that seemed very familiar. Examples were at most stands: Hudson dedicated almost its entire floorspace to *Deca Sports* on the Wii, which has ten sports next to *Wii Sports*' five; Sega showed *Dream Cats*, hoping to catch the tail of *Nintendogs*, and even the likes of Konami's yoga and pilates software for the DS had an obvious sideways influence from *Wii Fit*. More so than any gaming event in recent memory, TGS showed that Nintendo's success is beginning to dictate the business models of a great number of publishers.

The keynote speech, however, was delivered on day one by Kaz Hirai. A PS3 price cut was widely hoped for among the Japanese development community (and doubtless the buying public), but no such announcement was made. It is in some ways a vicious circle, with many companies indicating at their pre-TGS events they are waiting for the price cut to make the market viable and resume PS3 projects, and Sony's delay of that price cut holding back a badly needed software boost for the platform. One point of the keynote did deal with lowering the cost of the PS3: Sony is negotiating to sell the factory which is manufacturing the Cell processor and the single-chip PS2 to Toshiba for around ¥100 billion (£420m) with a deal likely to happen around spring 2008. Such a move would not only improve Sony's financial situation before the end of the financial year, it would also enable cost savings on the PS3 by, in effect, enabling Sony to license Cell.



Sony's presentation filled almost a quarter of its sizeable hall, seemingly an indication that there was a great deal of new content. There was certainly content, but unfortunately almost all of the major games had already been seen at prior events





The familiar sight of the Makuhari Messe in Chiba City began TGS '07, as well as some well-known faces – although a pot of gold would not have made us swap places with the poor souls who were encased in Bomberman's photo-popular and fluffy exterior for four days

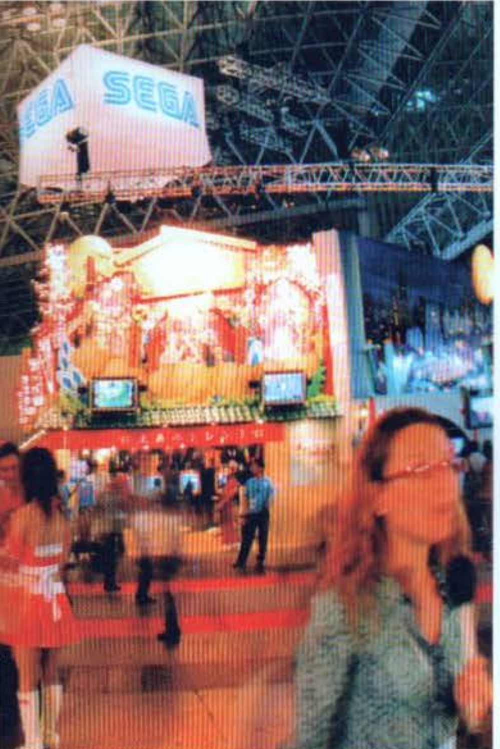
The DualShock 3 was, of course, presented as a big advance forward for the gaming experience on the PS3. There were ten compatible titles on the show floor, and it was confirmed that older games can be made compatible via updates. Video-on-demand services were a strong message, clearly aiming at expanding the PS3's appeal – but perhaps at the risk of conflicting messages about formats, with the company now promoting VOD, Blu-ray and UMD video. Hirai also confirmed that Home will be delayed, and *GT5 Prologue*'s release date was confirmed as December 13 for both download and packaged versions.

While 40 titles for the PS3 were shown, most had already been announced at last year's TGS, others were DLC, and the great majority were developed in the west

With no PS3 price cut, what about the games? SCEJ had a significant floor presence in the back of the main hall, with massed ranks of PS3s and PSPs (which, oddly enough, were older models rather than the new slimmed-down versions) showing off upcoming software. It was an impressive showing, primarily for its emphasis on PSN titles and quirky PSP games such as *Patapon*, but while 40 titles for the PS3 were shown, most had already been announced at last year's TGS, others were DLC, and the great majority were developed in the wes These 'Yoge' (western games) had a hard time



Monster Hunter Freedom 2 may have seemed a surprise winner of the GOTY award at TGS (sharing the honour with *Wii Sports*) but PSP sales in Japan have depended greatly on its success





The engineering spectacle of some of the stands was as diverting as ever, and several companies seemed to be trying to outdo each other with just how elaborate they could make temporary neon signs

Photography: Hiroki Izumi

capturing the attention of the Japanese gamers, and next to the hours-long queues for other titles were almost treated with derision (the excellent *LittleBigPlanet* being an honourable exception).

The one-hour keynote ended on the Wii. Hirai acknowledged Nintendo's success, and said that opening the gaming world to new users was only good for the industry. He claimed, however, that both platforms were not aiming at the same audience, and so in some ways the PS3 was being helped by the Wii's success.

Microsoft managed to put on a brave face, with a dedicated area decked out in clinical white and green tones, and crammed full of 360 consoles showing off the western big-hitters like *Halo 3* next to the Japanese hopes for the platform, such as *Beautiful Katamari*, *Gundam* and *Zoids Alternative*. Almost two years after its introduction, the 360 is still having a hard time in Japan, yet never before has Microsoft had such a targeted (and strong) line-up. *VF5* is the centre of attention, and few *VF* fans bought the PS3 version due to the console's high price, which may be a chance for the Core pack to pick up some sales.

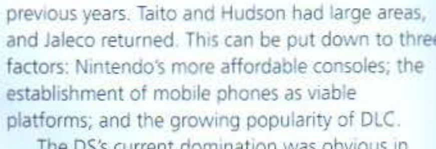
Quite apart from Sony and Microsoft, however, a pleasant surprise was to see some publishers who had almost disappeared from the show floor in

There was a huge push from Hudson for *Deca Sports*, taking up almost all its floorspace. Satoru Iwata recently said Nintendo was "not going to take such an easy way, not by including seven sports since *Wii Sports* has five". But then *Deca Sports* does have ten

The DS paddle for *Arkanoid* (which can also be used with *Space Invaders Extreme*) was an excellent add-on from Taito, bringing back some fond memories







previous years. Taito and Hudson had large areas, and Jaleco returned. This can be put down to three factors: Nintendo's more affordable consoles; the establishment of mobile phones as viable platforms; and the growing popularity of DLC.

The DS's current domination was obvious in most aspects of the show, from the sheer number of games in development, ranging from *Space Invaders Extreme* and *Metal Slug 7* to the 'Simple DS' series. It was difficult to visit a company's stand without seeing at least two or three DS games in development, or coming across statistics such as that about the Day of the Elder public holiday, when the DS was the top present offered to seniors in Japan, with a 20 per cent sales jump.

Regardless of platform, however, the major gaming event was a playable demo of the PS3's *Metal Gear Solid 4*, and a new trailer that certainly had the otaku salivating but perhaps revealed a few too many of the game's events – or taking the optimistic view, if *MGS4* can afford teasers like this then the full thing must be truly remarkable. The hands-on at least allowed *MGS4* to stand apart from the seemingly endless trailers as a game, however, and it proved capable of doing so.

The TGS 07 Game of the Year award was split between two titles: *Wii Sports*, which it was claimed 'has totally revamped the image of traditional game consoles [and] won over new





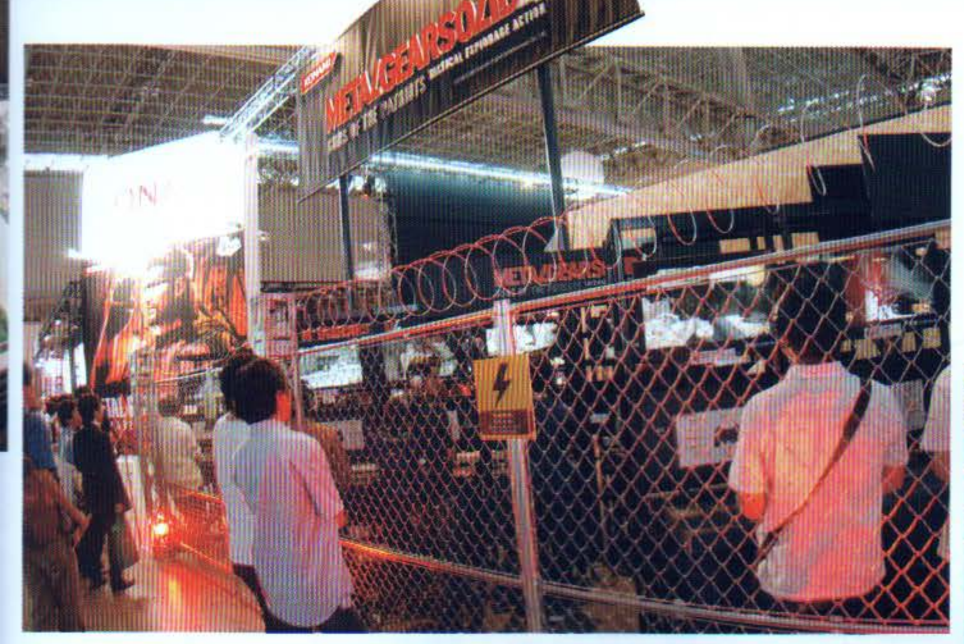
Microsoft's presentation area was slickly appointed, as you'd expect, but far more impressive was the fact that people were queuing to play some of the games – though not as many as for the *Dragon Quest* trinkets





Kaz Hirai's keynote speech (above) lacked concrete details to go with the future he outlined for Sony, most importantly in its thirdparty relationships. Despite the content being noble, it wasn't enough to prevent 'father of the PlayStation' Ken Kutaragi from actually falling asleep







As well as the line-ups for phones, manufacturers were showing off future models and their graphics capabilities – though the possibility of interfaces beyond the usual buttons wasn't broached

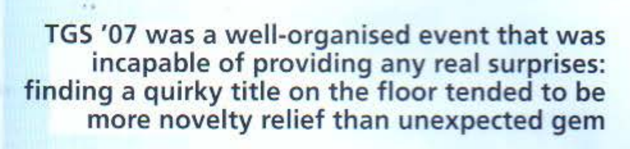




As is tradition, at the end of each day the hired female hands lined up for photo opportunities and to thank attendees for coming along to play videogames. And these were our favourites

demographic sectors'. The second was the PSP title *Monster Hunter Portable 2nd*, or *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* on western shores, a huge sales success in Japan and described as 'more than a game' by the judges. Heartening for the Xbox 360 was winning both the Global Award Japanese Product and Global Award Foreign Product awards, with *Dead Rising* and *Gears Of War* respectively.

Overall, TGS '07 was a well-organised event that was incapable of providing any real surprises: finding a quirky title on the floor tended to be more novelty relief than unexpected gem (though a Bandai Namco game on – of course – the DS, based on moving a witch's cauldron to catch spell ingredients, was a delightful, if limited, treat). In the ever-increasing international spotlight, there's no other way TGS can go, such is the over-exposure of any title of merit months before the showcase events. Even the attendance was slightly stagnating – 193,040 people attended the show, almost the same as last year, 192,411, but this year's event was one day longer.



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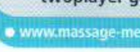
But even if TGS is reaching a plateau, there are always nice cameo moments at any event where the gaming world is gathered. Perhaps the most notable came early, and went largely unnoticed. As Kaz Hirai delivered the keynote speech, the world's photographers noted with joy that Ken Kutaragi had fallen asleep in the front row. Amid all the snapping and the woolly talk of the PlayStation future, a small and discreet group that had sat as near to the door as possible quietly slipped out. After 30 minutes of a 60-minute speech, the aides to Nintendo's top execs left. They had no official presence at TGS but, incognito, they were there to size up the opposition – and seemed to find it wanting.



Metal Gear Online's presentation area, complete with match commentators and a khaki-outfitted lady who barked instructions to the teams before beginning, was crammed throughout



If you've ever had to apologise to a special someone for neglecting them in favour of exploring the land of Hyrule, or defending the Earth from swarms of giant ants, then help may be at hand. The ingenuity of those behind Massage Me should now make it easy to convince ludophobic partners of gaming's value. Integrating a control device into a sleek, body-hugging vest, the Austria-based developer claims that 'the addicted game player becomes an inexhaustible masseur', thus coercing spurned spouses into experiencing the joy of videogaming, albeit from a rather more passive position than most twoplayer games demand.



• www.massage-me.at



EVENT

After the party's over

Halo 3 becomes the biggest media launch in history, but how will it affect Microsoft's world?

With Xbox 360 entering its third year of service, *Halo 3* has predictably taken the world by storm. Well, the colloquial videogame console world, at least. Microsoft triumphantly claims that, at $170m, its launch-day takings in the US far surpassed those of Sony's Spider-Man 3 film, the previous record holder for a media launch. But with a much higher price per unit it's hardly an indication that *Halo 3*'s has made quite the same impact on general culture.

Its UK launch, held at the Imax theatre in London, only seemed to confirm that Microsoft's aspirations for its golden child fly far beyond its reality. Its attempt at a Hollywood-style red carpet event fell decidedly flat in the face of a paltry selection of uninterested stars and a show that was aimed squarely at gamers, with several deathmatch sessions (hampered by disconnecting joypads and other control issues) that did little to demonstrate that *Halo 3* will find new audiences beyond the already converted.

Regardless, it has become the second-fastest-selling game in the UK after *GTA: San Andreas*, according to Chart Track, and caused 360 sales to double during the launch period. But whether it will finally push the Xbox division into profit is another matter – Microsoft Game Studios' vice president **Shane Kim** claimed it is too early to comment on financial success, but said in a recent interview with the BBC: "If we can't make a profit in the year *Halo 3* comes out, then when will we?"

A few days before *Halo*'s launch, Microsoft held small-scale local replacements for its big annual X0 showcase events. Though a great deal lower key than X0 and thin on new announcements, it was nevertheless a confident demonstration of where the company is in the run up to Christmas. Its line up of first- and thirdparty blockbusters like *PGR4* and *Halo 3*, *Mass Effect* and *The Orange Box*, is exemplary, and the Xbox Live Arcade titles announced at TGS, including *Rez HD*, *Ikaruga* and *Exit*, do much to back it up. The marketing department heads that were on hand could perhaps be forgiven for making such swaggering statements as 'we own the 16 to 34 gamer demographic' and boasting of an enviable attach rate of 6.3 games per console.

***Halo 3*'s red carpet launch was hosted by a somewhat emaciated Master Chief and attended by celebrities including Pharrell Williams, Christian Slater and someone off this year's Big Brother**

Also shown was minigame extravaganza *Viva Piñata Party Animals* and *Buzz*-alike *Scene It*, which did something to cover the more casual side of the market. *Scene It* will come packed with four infra-red buzzer controls, which are robust and well-considered, including a Xbox Guide button and directional controls for the 360's menus through rocking the large buzzer button.

Similarly aimed at catering to a broader audience are new pink and blue wireless joypads, and Microsoft was also keen to point out that, at

Scene It?, based on the popular DVD-based game, looks polished and proficient, but lacks some of the charm of Sony's *Buzz!*, and though its heritage might make it familiar to the casual market, would anyone be prepared to invest in a 360 over a single DVD?

£179, the price of its Core system matches that of the Wii. That said, rumours based on US retailer listings are currently circulating that the Core system in that territory will be discontinued in favour of new model called Arcade, which will come with a wireless joypad and a memory card loaded with five XBLA games.

Comparison to Wii is telling – Nintendo's console has now overtaken the 360 in worldwide sales, and the 360 has consistently undersold compared to its targets: in August 2006, Microsoft expected to sell 13 to 15 million consoles by June 2007, but has actually sold only around 11 million to date.

Microsoft has announced that it has now registered 7.1 million Live subscriptions – though would only confirm that within that figure there are more gold accounts than silver – and aims to have ten million by the end of June 2008. It also confirmed that its video download service, launched in November 2006 in North America, will begin to be rolled out in Europe by the end of 2007, starting with the UK. Prices, which for movies are on a rental basis, are yet to be to announced, as is the prevalence of high definition versions in its catalogue.

But though Microsoft has much to be bullish about for the remainder of 2007, 2008 is something of an unknown quantity. Whether it's because Microsoft is anxious to prevent eyes from being distracted from today's rich offerings or fears that next year will pale in comparison, one thing is clear: firstparty studio games like *Fable 2*, *Too Human* and *Alan Wake* have a hard act to follow. And, with the pressure on the Xbox division to finally make some money, for the 360 the fight is far from finished.

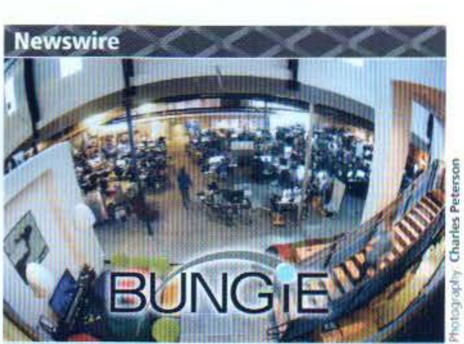
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Viva Piñata Party Animals (above) allies the game series closer with the spirit of the TV series, with minigames such as using belches to propel paper boats. *Exit* (right) is one of a series of successful Japan-developed games that is being converted for release on Live Arcade

Newswire

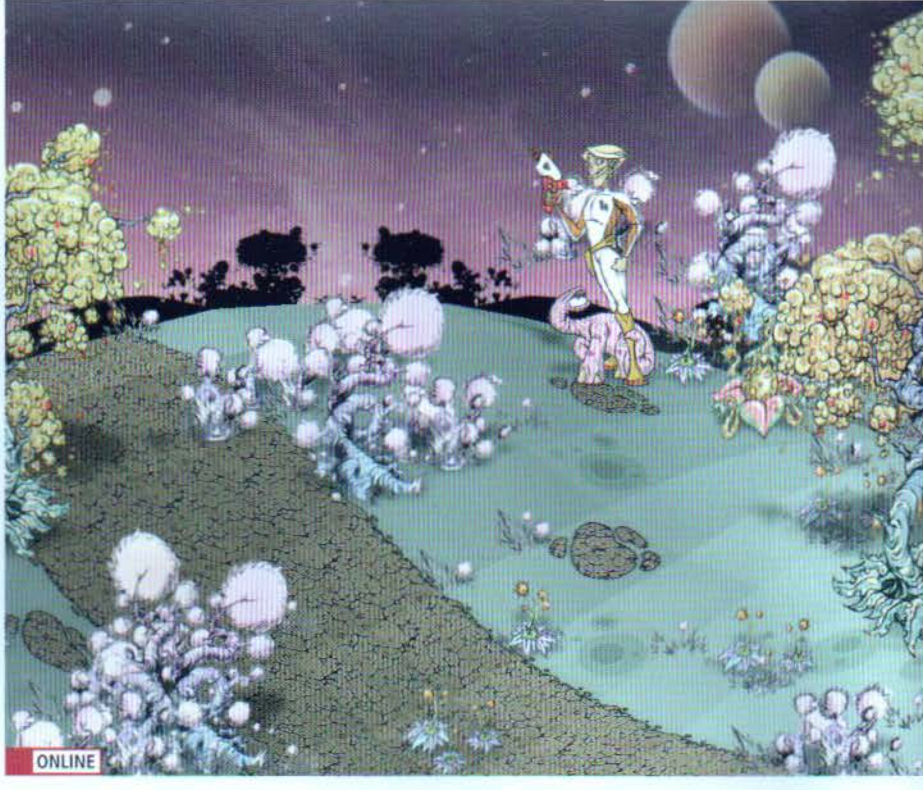


Photography: Charles Peterson

Microsoft and Bungie evolve

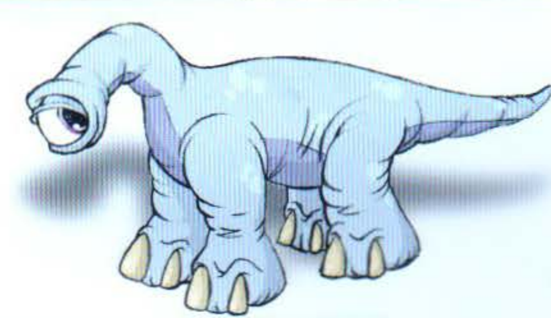
Following rumours of a split, Microsoft finally confirmed that Bungie is to become an independent company via a press release dripping in corporate euphemism. However, Bungie will maintain its publishing agreement with Microsoft, which owns the rights to the *Halo* franchise. With the British-based developers of the *Project Gotham Racing* series, Bizarre Creations, also jumping ship to Activision, Microsoft's portfolio of game studios has been significantly diminished. To lose one high-profile game studio may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose two looks like carelessness.





Teaching old MMOGs new tricks

MMO maker Raph Koster on how games could learn from the web





MECH SPREADING

Japan's agricultural ministry delivered a rap to the knuckles of several bureaucrats who had been spending work-hours tweaking Wikipedia entries. Well over half of the 408 offending editorial contributions were on the subject of Gundam, the hugely popular giant robot franchise that has spawned countless anime and videogames. The reprimand comes as a result of an investigation into allegations that ministers were editing Wikipedia to reflect their political bias. Ministry official Tsutomu Shimomura was quick to assuage fears that Gundam would be tainted by partisanship. "The agricultural ministry is not in charge of Gundam," he said.

The designer behind *Ultima Online*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, and one-time chief creative officer at Sony Online Entertainment, **Raph Koster** (above) has a long-standing pedigree in creating online worlds. Now he's in the process of launching Metaplace, a web application that allows anyone to produce and play online games through their web browser, from 2D racers to 3D MMOs. Having just opened Metaplace to closed alpha testing, he talked to us about the culture clash between games and web development.

So Metaplace is about allowing anybody to implement MMOs on the web?

Yeah. We have a motto: build anything and play anything from anywhere. But Metaplace isn't built solely around massively multiplayer games. You can make single player games as well. We've already made things like puzzle games, 2D overhead space combat games, and we're working on RPGs and MMORPGs, so really it means any of those things. I don't doubt that there'll be things that the platform can't make, but we'll figure out ways so it will.

So far, what creativity are you seeing?

People are already talking about crazy wonderful stuff. One of them wants to remake a virtual world that is a 1980s arcade, others are already trying to figure how to use avatars between worlds. We've been hearing from educational institutions, from people who want to use it for research – just all



Koster's vision for Metaplace is one of openness, so each element in every game can interact with the greater internet with ease to produce high-score tables or in-game RSS-generated newspapers

sorts of projects. Some ideas are coming from core gamers, who want to make a RPG the way they like it.

How did you convince investors that there was a market for this?

The official pitch was essentially that virtual worlds work like AOL did in 1994 – that as of yet they haven't absorbed the lessons of the web. When you look at the web, a lot of products use openness, right? And user participation is a major current. So when we married this growth with AOL-style virtual worlds, suddenly it's an interesting business picture for investors: exponential growth and a chance to have something disruptive.

How has creating Metaplace compared with the likes of *Star Wars Galaxies*?

It's a very different experience. The big MMO projects need teams of100 or more people and take years – I think *WOW* was five. Metaplace started out with it being just me and working with





The Metaplace game development toolkit will run in Flash as well as other runtime environments and offer a raft of standard tools, though some programming knowledge will be necessary to create projects. The system uses MetaScript, a custom-built language that's based on Lua, but the aim is to keep it as adaptable as possible to give users as much freedom as possible whilst ensuring what they produce runs across multiple platforms as standard

web technology was kind of easy. I was able to get a simple functional prototype going myself. Now, our team is composed half of game developers and half of web developers, working side by side. It's enabled us to have a really lean team of about a dozen people.

Has the interaction between your games people and web people been fruitful?
Yeah, but any time you cross disciplines you always learn stuff. But there are things that games can learn from the web and vice versa. There's a lot of discussion about the playful web these days, and that's the web picking up on ideas from games. On the game side, we've learned a lot about the benefits of open standards, of very different methods of production that involve much less extensive preplanning and much more rapid iteration.

Do you think there's much difference between the web and videogame industries?
There is a really big culture gap. It's the core games industry that's failing to join up, because the web industry is pillaging game ideas with abandon. Web people are used to not knowing what kind of platform people are using and they're used to rapid iteration. Games use usage statistics differently, too. MMO developers might say: 'Oh, they're killing this monster too much, let's fix that'. On the web, developers make more of whatever users are doing, not less. You see websites completely change when their business models change. Probably one of the most dramatic of these is Flickr, which was originally born as an MMORPG called *Game Neverending*. Now it's a photo-sharing site!

Why the big difference?
A lot of it boils down to the issue of control. The web feeds a lot of control to users and the games industry doesn't. It's kind of a shame because it's something that the games industry used to have and has kind of lost. It flowers every once in a while, like there was a beautiful explosion of modding in the '90s, which has kind of faded out now. I think the industry has gotten caught in a very Hollywood-like 'broadcast big old blockbusters' kind of hole.

There are moves away from that, though...
I think people making games who don't ascribe to that philosophy tend to be seen as being on the fringe if they're in the industry at all. That's evidenced by the fact that they end up having their own conferences, like casual games or serious games summits, because they're not quite like the rest of us. But I see all this stuff as one. I think the indie guys making Flash games and putting them up on Newgrounds are in our industry, but not to the typical EA marketing guy.

"The web feeds a lot of control to users and the games industry doesn't. It's kind of a shame because it's something that the games industry used to have and has kind of lost"

So, do you fear that the videogame industry won't take Metaplace seriously?
I've got a positive response from a lot of game developers, and a couple of publishers have been very intrigued. They're aware that their business models are not looking great long-term because of rising budgets and difficulties creating new IP and platform lock-ins, so we're seeing a lot of interesting movements, like EA going into casual games. But there's also a sense from some people that Metaplace is just going to be 'MySpace garbage'. And that's a disservice to the creativity of users and obviously it's a bit of a disservice to MySpace. The videogames industry would kill to have MySpace's audience.

Newswire



Google patents game ad tech

The search engine giant has filed a number of patents relating to delivering in-game advertising to players. The patents, of which seven have been uncovered, detail technology which detects when a game is launched and directs advertising to the player, tailored to his or her specific location, behaviour and interests. The patents also cover the means of collecting this data. The encroachment of commercial interests are probably inevitable in such a rapidly expanding medium. Let's hope that Google sticks to its 'don't be evil' mantra.



Metaplace's alpha release has attracted over 100,000 applications for membership, far more than Koster expected, and far more than the site can currently manage. By the time you're reading this, the first few hundred members will have been given closed access

SOUND BYTES

'Cutscenes undermine the sense of involvement – of play – that is games' authentic métier. Games have become a backward-looking medium. Because game designers rely on the language of cinema, they have not sufficiently developed a new form of storytelling'
New York Times contributor **Daniel Radosh** kaboshes videogaming's obsession with cinema

'When there's a videogame that makes the player depressed, that's when the medium might be on to something as an art form. It's easy to like something that makes you feel powerful in its fantasy world but would anybody play a game that makes him sad?'
The Washington Post describes why its book critic Michael Dirda feels that *BioShock* isn't quite art

"You're able to buy a virtual Bravia television that does not break. That's kind of funny, in some sense. It was too polished, somehow. It didn't feel like I'd really call that place my home"
Habbo Hotel's lead designer, **Sulka Haro**, proves himself quotable two months in a row – this time discussing his opinion of PlayStation 3's Home

'We would ignore it were it not for the internet's propensity for drama where none exists. The reason we haven't mentioned this before is that it would have distracted from more important aspects of the game, and given tinfoil hats new gristle to chew on as they catalogued their toenail clippings.'
Luke Smith of Bungie.net dismisses the misplaced outrage at *Halo 3*'s native resolution of 'almost 720p'


INTERVIEW

Love, actually

Can Swedish developer Quel Solaar prove that it's love, not loot, that makes the world go round?

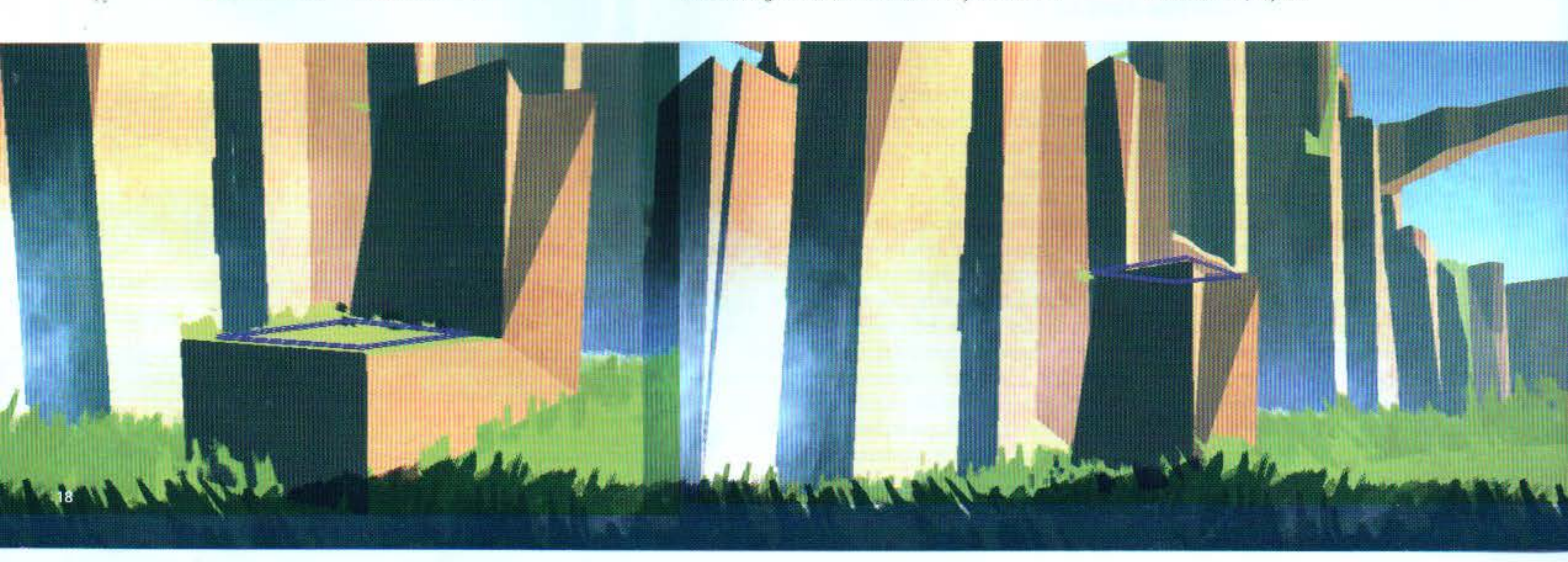
Collaboration isn't totally alien to MMO players, but its aim is often ultimately selfish, bringing character advancement, loot and new items. Two-man indie developer Quel Solaar feels that such goals miss the point – it is actually the stories we create together that are the ones we cherish most. We manage to catch up with one half of Quel Solaar, **Eskil Steenberg** (above), to talk about its proof-of-concept, *Love*.

Love **promises to involve players in an engaging story – but so much of the game is procedurally generated. How do you marry these two fairly opposed ideas?**
We've been really interested in looking at multiplayer games, and especially RTS games, where you have this ebb and flow that creates a story – not a preset narrative, but a story of the game as it's played – a story of the players and their experiences. For example: you are living in this village and everything's fine. Then somebody attacks you and you start realising that you get a lot of attacks from a particular place; automatically, just by dealing with that threat you've created a story – it's a very simple story, but if you start expanding that and creating sidequests and introducing twists and turns, then you do have a story. I've been looking at movies like Star Wars, trying to figure out what the basic building blocks of a story are and finding ways of introducing these elements into the world to give people an idea of narrative.

"I want to step away from the idea of creating stories with AI characters – the story should be amongst the heroes, the players"


With *Love*'s character system still in the works, the images available so far are of the game's beautiful, painterly environments and terrain sculpting system (below)

Say you have a stronghold of the AI enemy that keeps sending out enemies and it takes two full days until a player finally manages to destroy it, having already completed a series of tasks like finding weak-spots, gathering the right tools, keys and weapons. The ruins of the stronghold will then be named after the player, and others who come to this place will recognise the significance of that player. In a sense we are building characters and story, not through a written story, but through real gameplay. I want to step away from the idea of creating stories with AI characters – the story should be amongst the heroes, the players.





"There's actually only two people working on the project," says Steenberg. "Well, in fact we're not even two full-time people; we're more a quarter person and two-thirds person. So, maybe I shouldn't make promises, but If we fail and everything goes to hell, I think I'll at least be able to give a great talk to other game developers about it – we have some cool features that we're experimenting with"

One of the game's unique features is the ability to alter the landscape – to what extent will this power be in the players' hands?

The engine has a very novel terrain technology that makes it possible for players to modify the ground simply by pulling it, but rather than just a height field you can also build cliffs, dungeons, houses and bridges with it. They can't do that everywhere – there'll be a limit to the number of cities in the world, and though you can place them pretty much wherever you want, you can only build around in that immediate area, limiting the havoc you can create on the world's environment. Although we've created a sandbox engine, it is not designed to be a sandbox game for the players, but rather for the game itself. By using procedural technology the game can generate dungeons, strongholds, turn cities in to ruins and create endless things for the player to explore. Since we can generate as much content as we want, players don't have to ever play the same thing twice. Old content will turn to ruins and give the world a sense of history. You may play one day and then check in two days later only to find that the city you started building has grown, a dam has been built and the enemy tower is in ruins. It's almost like a soap opera that constantly moves forward.

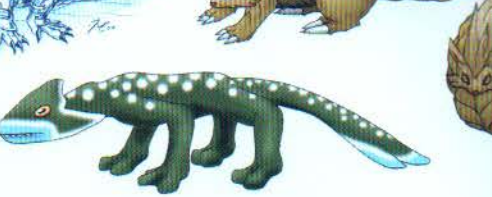
How does the game's action stand apart from other MMOs?

One of the key goals is to get away from statistics menus and character building. The players should rather focus on the environment – building a forge or a city or something that other players can experience and be a part of. By restricting the possibilities of what you can do as one character we're hoping we'll get people playing and building stuff together. The fact that items are shared communally also strengthens the collaborative side of the game and means that players who only play occasionally have access to the same things as the people who invest more time. But the player who can bring in the cool stuff becomes more significant story-wise.

What kind of freedom does this procedural generation give you as a game designer?

In a way, we've tried to program a game designer instead of actually being a game designer. I wanted to do a sandbox game not just for the players, but for me to play with new types of gameplay and new ideas. What will work in the end, I can't really tell – that's sort of part of it.





Creative community

Shiny founder David Perry has entrusted the creation of his next game to the public

With his cohorts of bedroom developers now having completed design and preproduction on his MMO racing game, **David Perry** (left) is now inviting them to pitch for the job of making it. In this experiment, called Project Top Secret, one contributor will win directorship of a future MMO for publisher Acclaim and the dev team a professional contract. With the venture now unveiled, we talked with Perry about running a developer with 52,000 staff.

Why use amateurs in this way to create a professional game?

I go to a lot of colleges and I'm always blown away by somebody in the group that doesn't know how talented they are. Some little kid, shy as all hell, will pull out an amazing demo reel. It's these few that make Top Secret interesting.

> "Can you imagine how viral this game will be if it's made by the community? It's free to play so they can give it to their friends"

Don't you get an enormous amount of unusable content?

Yeah, the hard part is filtering and keeping it all under control. The pictures are a little taste of that – I get thousands of images, and when you look through it you will find one or two you like. This is what user-generated content is all about, and the skill, or the thing we're trying to learn, is how to filter and manage it.

What's the basic premise behind the game?

The idea they came up with was beast racing, which I've never really seen before in a game. Your beast can get toasted by other beasts, leaving you on your feet trying to revive it with these massive animals thundering by. Each beast is incredibly powerful and there to help keep you alive, but you can easily switch to being very vulnerable – it's a fun game design mechanic.

What else has the community come up with?

Some ideas were pretty wacky – someone suggested we create a commentator system, whereby some players would comment on the races. Professional designers traditionally only design things for all players, but the community says that some people will want to be commentators, levelling up to get to be the commentator for championship races. Commentators bring such energy and information to sports games, so it's actually really cool.



The creature concept art over these two pages is a cross-section of the quality of material submitted to Project Top Secret by its members, from the good to the bad, the dull to the inexplicable

How do you decide what ideas go through?

One of the problems is the amount of ideas and thousands of conversations going on, and they would come to me and ask me for decisions. And the minute I did, I'd get inundated with people asking why they didn't pick their ideas. It was a problem, and it's not truly community created because I was making the decisions. So we created an advisory board of people from the community who handle the voting and decisions. I just sit in on their hugely long conference calls.

Do you see many good ideas get ignored?

I've absolutely found that suggestions I think are really cool absolutely flatline. I thought it would be neat to have a secret agenda system in the racing, so the game would give bonuses if you finish off certain rivals. It was flatlined. You really start to learn who your community is. They suggested a card system for the game and everyone went crazy for it.

Is that right for the game, though?

As the director of the whole thing I have to keep it realistic and make sure we end up with something, and when I hear something like that I say that it sounds a good idea but I don't think it's important for shipping a racing game – I don't want to split attention on a card game too. If we nail the racing then the card part is a brilliant follow up.

Photography: Suzanne Bernel



Perry says that the community wants to also produce an accompanying Magic: The Gathering-style collectible card game, and despite Perry's reservations that it might, at this point, distract attention from the main game, members have already started designing the rule-set and cards (left)

Do you get much dissent?

So far I haven't had much problem. I take my time to explain myself so it doesn't sound random. We do get the odd hater, just like in every office, and in the office you fire that dude. We delete their posts and tell them to move along. Running a real team takes tough decisions like that.

How is the game going to get made?

The obvious thing to do was to hire a professional team – I'd actually already chosen one. But can you imagine how viral this game will be if it's made and designed by the community? It's free to play so they can give it to their friends, so I thought let's give the community a chance. The problem for independent game developers is that they'll take an engine like Source and mod it but they can never release these games professionally. We'll give them all the tools required – task management, source control, and pay up to $1 million for any engine they want, and give a $100,000 advance on royalties for the team that wins the job, plus an industry-standard publishing deal. The idea is to help somebody go from indie to full published professional team in one pop.

That sounds hugely ambitious.

I'm not being silly about it – it's a very big challenge. It's only going to be a few teams that can pull this off. There's no book I can buy that tells me how to do all this. I wish it was easy, but it's not. People say that I'm doing this so I can make a game for free, but I'm like: 'You have no idea'. We'd be so much further on in a normal game scenario because we'd just hire people and I'd just make decisions. It's way, way, way much more work.

IN2Games has certainly accurately perceived and diligently replicated the presentation of other successful lifestyle games – the packaging even reproduces *SingStar's* gradients and curlicues

Although unmounted, *Realplay Racing's* steering wheel seemed a competent means of control. Hopefully there will be a fully fledged game under the gimmick

HARDWARE

Perpetuating motion

Thirdparty developer IN2Games brings motion sensitivity to PlayStation 2

The tech behind IN2Games' forthcoming suite of motion-sensitive controllers has been in development since 2000 but, for a long time, the company lacked the funds to go to market. Unsurprisingly, the Wii's success changed all that. What is stranger in hindsight, however, is that it has fallen to thirdparty developers to deliver these peripherals for other consoles. Sony seems unwilling to countenance motion sensitivity as anything more than a passing gimmick – the Sixaxis' tilt control has yet to convince in its various uses and, bafflingly, the previous-generation console has been neglected. It is a short-sighted omission by Sony, since it is to cheaper low-end systems that the casual market has been attracted – and, as the Wii's triumphant courting of casual gamers suggests, it is this group who are likely to be most enamoured with motion sensitivity.

There's no doubt a market for motion-sensitive games amongst the PS2's huge customer base, and the console has already seen a success in the social gaming field

Sony's failure is IN2Games' opportunity, and the company has created a range of PS2 games under the Realplay brand that are sold alongside their own feature-specific control devices. Six titles have been announced so far, each coming with a USB dongle and wireless controller. The Realplay titles cover the usual suspects – tennis, golf, racing, bowling, pool – and the controllers resemble the tools of each sport, albeit comically small, plastic versions. The one other title, *Puzzlesphere* (below), is a *Monkey Ball*-style game using a controller of predictably spherical shape, which you tilt in order to direct a ball through a maze.

There's no doubt a market for motion-sensitive games amongst the PS2's huge customer base, and the console has already seen a success in the social gaming field with titles like *SingStar*. IN2Games' marketing push intends to present the suite as a budget alternative, replicating Wii gameplay without the need to purchase an expensive console. But, while IN2Games' move initially seems a canny one, it is possible that by tying each device so closely to a game this perception of value-for-money has been jeopardised; surely one of the major appeals of the Wii's control system is that it combines ergonomic function with incredible versatility. It is a tennis racquet, golf club and steering wheel all at the same time, as well as including many, many more functions.

The Realplay range begins to seem like a false economy – a Wii plus *Wii Sports* may cost in the region of £180; at £30 for each of the six Realplay titles, you cease to make a saving. Realplay's success therefore relies on its titles possessing greater depth or quality of control than that offered by the Wii's minigame packages.

IN2Games also has a universal control device for the PS3 and 360, called Freedom, due for release next year – it's a more attractive solution than a clutter of separate peripherals, and it makes you wonder why IN2Games doesn't take advantage of this early lead to dominate the PS2 space in a similar manner, before other companies come in to contend it.




The pool game predictably uses only the motion sensitivity of its cue to determine how hard you hit the ball – the angle is determined by the D-pad on the cue's grip



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

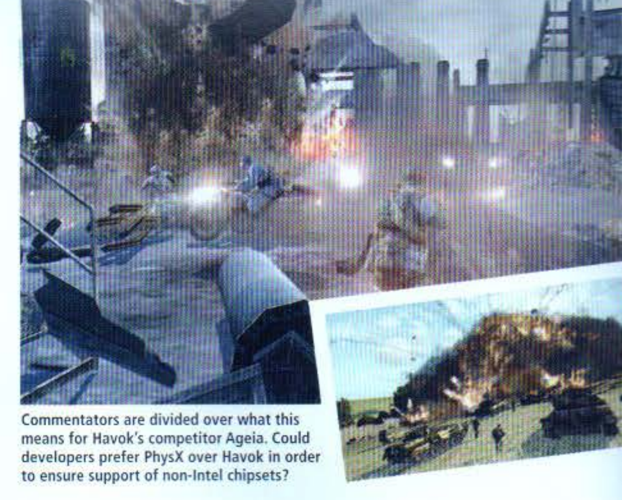
On the one hand, Bungie.net is a wonderful resource. A place to view the stats of every *Halo* deathmatch you've ever played, to find out which maps you're best on, with which weapon you make the most kills. It's a place to view and download your screenshots and those of your opponents and teammates, a place to browse material that Bungie has found, and line up movies, Forge maps and game types for download next time you play. It's a way of playing *Halo 3* vicariously. On the other hand, it's a poisonous reminder that you're not, a frozen reminder of the paucity of your rank and the fun others are experiencing while you are stuck at your desk. Essential yet distressing.

Site:
Bungie.net
URL:
www.bungie.net



Intel cries Havok

The US hardware giant makes its move into the middleware scene


Commentators are divided over what this means for Havok's competitor Ageia. Could developers prefer PhysX over Havok in order to ensure support of non-Intel chipsets?




To date, Havok has been employed in over 150 games including *Halo 3*, *Test Drive Unlimited* and *Crackdown*

Intel's recent purchase of Irish-based Havok, developer of the middleware physics engine of the same name, suggests interesting developments in the direction Intel intends to take processing power in the coming years. It's been a tumultuous time for the processor industry – in the face of unmanageable temperatures, Intel has abandoned its quest to squeeze greater clockspeeds out of single-core processors and instead followed the model of the graphics card manufacturers, who have for along time found a solution by throwing more and more execution units – essentially more cores – at the problem.

Given this move towards multicore, it seems to make sense that Intel would then wish to support technologies that directly benefit from increases in parallel processing power – such as the calculations behind physics and AI. Although Havok will continue to operate as an independent business, it will have access to Intel's Software and Solutions Group as well as tools and technology – and this greater integration will ensure that the now widespread Havok middleware is optimised for Intel's upcoming graphics processing unit, codenamed Larrabee. The union should see the proliferation of physics and ray-tracing trickery as Intel tries to use Havok's capabilities to give Larrabee the edge over competitors.

Commentators have expressed concerns that the aquisition could mean Havok becomes less efficient on chipsets made by Intel's competitors, AMD and Nvidia. Equally, how well will Ageia's PhysX middleware run on Larrabee? At least game developers can take heart that Intel will now have an incentive to alleviate some of the burden that multithreaded programming has placed upon them, helping make best use of Havok and Larrabee's feature set.

Continue

Finishing moves
Nothing punctuates a good fight like a knife in the eye

Halo 3 media
Enjoy the thrill of a perfect sticky from your desk

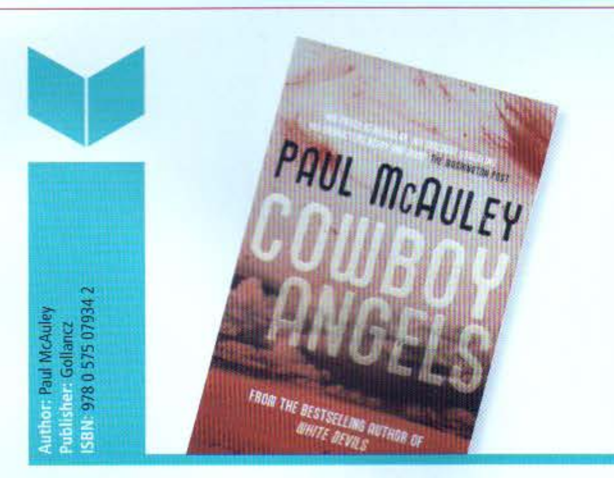
Spy games
We giggle with glee as an enemy medic heals us

Quit

Drawn-out boss battles
So we just need to use more ammo? That's... it?

Vending machine nosh
For ¥300, convenient it may be. Edible? Barely

Flat batteries
Wanted: joypads powered only by Special Magic



Author: Paul McAuley
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 978 0 575 07934 2

COWBOY ANGELS

Brisk adventures in alternative American realities ensure McAuley keeps the pages turning

Considering he's known for his hard sci-fi, ex-research biologist Paul McAuley's recent work has taken a particularly political bent. Maybe that's why Cowboy Angels replaces the biotech and nanotech themes with a relatively gung-ho thriller based around alternative universe versions of 1980s America. As ever, someone from the agency has their own underhand plan when it comes to spreading traditional values of democracy and capitalism, and no one, not even an alternative version of Jimmy Carter, is going to get in their way.

One-time agent Adam Stone really doesn't care any more. Retired to an alternative wilderness after selling out his erstwhile colleagues, he's lost faith in the great proselytising project. Still, when one of his wilder partners goes on a killing spree across different realities, always murdering the same woman, he's reluctantly bought back into play. Something of an everyman, Stone doesn't think hard about what he's doing, so he heads back to their old haunts to pick up the trail. Dodging the attentions of local law enforcement, the deeper schemes of the various affiliations within the agency, not to mention the killer's endgame, it doesn't take long before Stone finds himself out on a limb of his own. And even if the potential of the alternative history arc doesn't really gel, Cowboy Angels is nothing if not compelling. But like Stone himself, don't expect it to be a thinker.



Author: Ian Bogost
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 978 0 262 02614 7

PERSUASIVE GAMES

US academic Bogost turns his attention to the persuasive power of serious games, albeit with mixed results

One of the growing band of thinkers turned game designers, assistant professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology Ian Bogost is obviously a clever man. Maybe too clever. His first games-related book, Unit Operations (E164), would be baffling to anyone not doing a Ph.D. Persuasive Games, subtitled The Expressive Power of Videogames, is slightly easier to handle thanks to its subject matter; games that try to persuade us about politics, education and advertising. But the theory continues to be laid on pretty thick. Bogost's thrust seems to be that the power of videogames is more than their content. Potentially, this is an interesting approach as it brings McLuhan's 'medium is the message' homily to bear on the issue of interactivity.

Too quickly however, he's moved on, inventing a new concept, procedural rhetoric, which he suggests affords us a promising way to make claims about how things (notably games) work. Yet, bizarrely, the first game he applies his new tool to is anti-fast-food freebie *The McDonald's Videogames*: hardly a title that requires sophisticated analysis. And sadly, this is the level throughout much of the book. Partly it's due to the narrow choice of subject matter, as by definition serious games are one-way arguments. The only commercial games covered are well-worn favourites such as *SimCity*, *GTA* and *Animal Crossing* so it's difficult to understand how Procedural Rhetoric would apply more widely

INCOMING

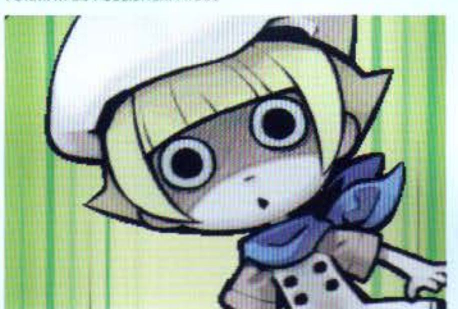
New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Project Origin
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TBA



Monolith declares its second war on office furniture with the true sequel to *FEAR*. Viewed through a fashionable concave visor HUD, the action seems suitably incendiary, the animation incredible

Touch Detective 2 1/2
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** ATLUS



Unlike its predecessor, the western follow-up to *Osawaru Tentai Ozawa Rina* isn't letting its art obscure its design. An overarching storyline ties its mysteries together, its clues now easier to spot

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed
FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS



A Wii version? With gestural lightsaber and Force power controls? Was there an air of inevitability to that 'news' or have we all developed Jedi precognitive powers? Krome Studios develops

Flower
FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



Building on the relative (to most other PSN titles) success of *flOw*, thatgamecompany unveils its successor, another ponderous ode to the beauty of nature. Score attack fans should look away now

Tom Clancy's Air Combat
FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



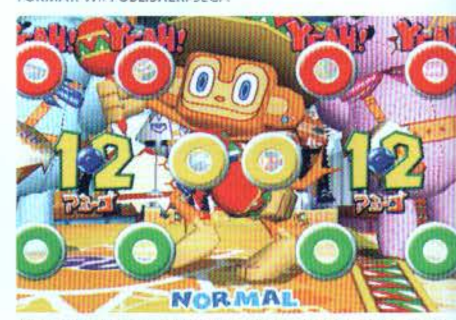
With the *Blazing Angels* franchise stalled and earthbound, Ubisoft gives its Bucharest studio an enviable second – or indeed third – chance. Expect a mainstream alternative to *Ace Combat's* niche

Pirates Of The Caribbean Online
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE



Disney's massively delayed online RPG entered its second beta testing phase last month. Combat (on land and sea) and visuals are still defiantly simple, VR Studios' enthusiasm undiminished

Samba De Amigo
FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



If Sega and Nintendo bury the hatchet any further it'll pop out in Australia. Another mascot makes its way to Wii, this time with the aid of FPS specialist Gearbox, creator of *Brothers In Arms*

Mamonoro
FORMAT: ARCADE **PUBLISHER:** GULTI



Is it that time already? Another vertical shooter from G.rev heads for arcades, this time with help from start-up developer Gulti. With a number of ex-*Raiden* staffers involved, the signs are good

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS



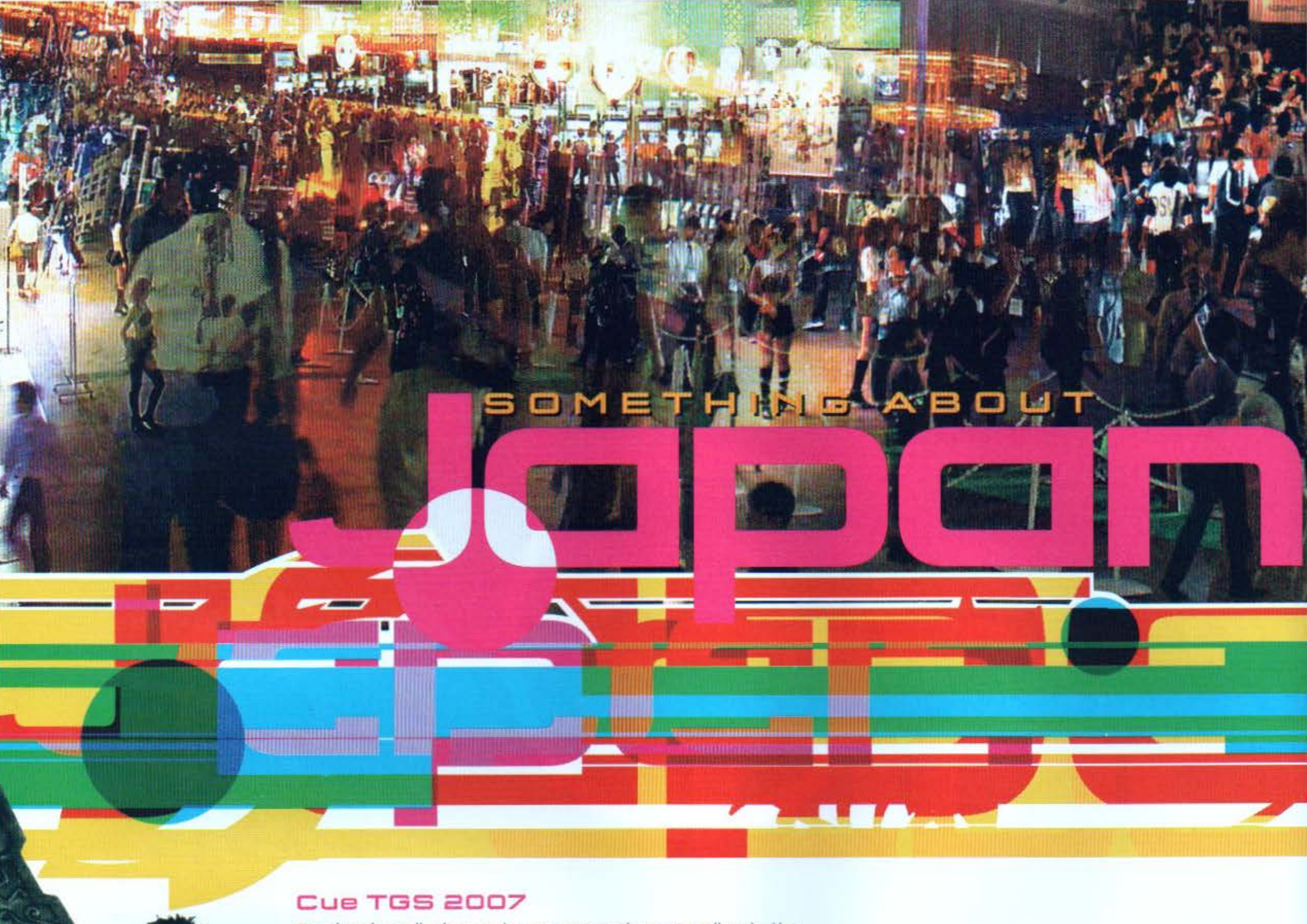
Mann alive! IO's duelling dualists finally have a release date set for November 23. The latest reports suggest further similarities to *Freedom Fighters*, though visually it's already showing its age



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Knytt Stories

nifflas.ni2.se/index.php?main=02Knytt-Stories

Like Swedish game developer and musician Nicklas 'Nifflas' Nygren's first *Knytt* game, *Knytt Stories* is a finely tuned two-dimensional platformer, as minimalist in its gameplay as in its distinctive art style, which captures surreal and striking landscapes in simple geometric shapes and soft gradients. However, whereas the first game comprised one single scenario, *Knytt Stories* comes with a level editor and the game acts as a front-end for content that is divided up into downloadable scenarios. With an expansion pack also released, there are four full scenarios to play, and no doubt more will issue from creative fans. Reminiscent of the original *Metroid* games, the player has to revisit environments as he gains further powers. You spend no more than a matter of minutes in each section; the world's theme constantly changing and accompanied by beautiful ambient music. And, with each scenario just on the limit of what you can remember without a map, *Knytt Stories* compels you to finish scenarios in one sitting before you forget where you need to go.



Cue TGS 2007

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa has a great time standing in line

For the first time in its history, the TGS this year lasted for four days, with the visitor days acting almost as a coda to what had already been done. The four days were in part a response to the growing media interest around videogames, and partly to do with the growth in the industry as a business (the increase was due to two business days rather than one). To call the public days a 'coda' suggests that they were the end of a beautiful composition, but they were really more like the tail end of the event: the stated objective of which was to give more opportunities for Japanese companies to create business relationships with overseas firms. Delving even further into my chosen TGS word, the French took from 'coda' a term that will be very familiar to any attendee of the Tokyo Games Show: queue.

They're funny things, queues. People stand in line, waiting for something at the end for hours at a time. My favourites are those who stand behind you for about 20 minutes before asking: "Oh, is the queue for *Nights*?" When you point out it's not and where to go, you wonder how they've missed the maps, waited 20 minutes behind you without asking, and failed to notice the huge '*Metal Gear Solid Online*' banner at the end of the line. Or the people who are in the right queue, but decide after waiting for an hour, with one more hour to go, that they've wasted their time and leave. Wherever else they go, in the TGS at least, they will just join the back of another queue! People just drift into and out of queues for as long as they're there.

They're funny things, queues. People stand in line, waiting for something at the end for hours at a time. My favourites are those who stand behind you for about 20 minutes before asking: "Oh, is the queue for Nights?"

But it was the games they were queuing for, and to be fair some publishers had made foolish decisions, such as Level-5 who prepared a free demo ROM for the DS of two of its coming titles for people who attended its showing. Guess what happened next? Naturally, the word got around like wildfire and they were absolutely mobbed and ran out by noon. Great advertising and a clever ploy? Not so: a four-hour-long queue had formed almost instantly, and some people spent their precious time at TGS queuing for a demo that was out of stock: I saw some of those make their feelings very clear. The following day, Level-5 decided to try again by going with tickets, which disappeared 20 minutes after the doors had opened – but at least that time no one was fooled.

Where were the biggest queues? *Metal Gear Solid 4*, as expected, had four hours of waiting for around ten minutes of game. *Metal Gear Online* wasn't quite as popular, but still had people queuing for hours. Sega's *Nights* booth was permanently packed, as were some Sony games like *LittleBigPlanet*. The 360 didn't go unnoticed either, with titles like *Halo 3*, *PGR4*, *Ace Combat 6* and *Lost Odyssey* proving popular. The queues snaked into the distance for the closed room where you could play *Assassin's Creed*, and I have to say that game was visually remarkable – but what was more remarkable is that I got the feeling, from looking at the people queuing and talking to some of them, that Japanese gamers are not as allergic to western titles as perhaps they once were.

There were other surprises: who knew that people would queue up to play *Dragon Quest IV* on DS, a version of the NES game which was re-released as recently as six years ago for the



PlayStation? Or the *Final Fantasy* re-releases for portable consoles? But that is how crazy some Japanese fans are for their favourite series. Square Enix, the company behind those games, also distributed tickets for its Closed Mega Theater, where a session lasted a huge 35 minutes and simply showed footage of the upcoming products. But because the names in there were the likes of *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest* and *Star Ocean* the tickets sold out very quickly – and in this sense I suppose enormous queues are nothing more than a sign of a booth's popularity. But I can't imagine most people spent more than an hour actually playing games over the two days. Compared to previous events, this TGS had, without doubt, the most spectacular queues.

I've barely mentioned the event itself, so I'll end with my own little coda. The queer thing is that I enjoyed it, and took away a long and lasting impression of a wide range of quality software. There was no Nintendo and no new hardware, but a lot of new games and, after all, surely that's what gaming's all about. If you don't enjoy cramming into an air conditioned hall with tens of thousands of people, hoping to find a brilliant new game or play an eagerly awaited one, then, well, you'd better get to the back of the line.

The most anticipated playable game at TGS was obviously *MGS4* and, with a nod to both practicality and setting out a stylish area, Konami decided to put the terminals behind a large 'electrified' security fence

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock



Though now under the shadow of *Rock Band*, we expect that the next instalment in this brilliant rhythm-action series will still ignite the office with the flames of rock.
360, PS3, WII, ACTIVISION

Wipeout HD



After the disappointment of *Fatal Inertia*, we hope this remastered 'greatest hits' edition of the renowned anti-grav racer will show the competition how it's done.
PS3, SONY

Haze



What we've played of Free Radical's morality-bending shooter makes us eager to sit down and find out if it can beat that drum while keeping up the action.
PS3, UBISOFT

Control yourself

How the best laid plans undermine gaming's interactivity



Predetermined finishing moves and QTEs make good cinema but they indicate that games are still uncomfortable with the extent to which they give players control. Have things really developed since *Road Avenger* on the Mega CD?

In our preview sessions with *The Bourne Conspiracy* and *Beowulf*, much was made of the way these titles bring film conventions to gaming. Such claims are not unwarranted: when Bourne swiftly dispatches three enemies with a series of lightning blows, the action is captured by energetic cuts of the camera; when *Beowulf* climbs on the back of an ogre, you know what follows will be fluidly animated and bloodily dramatic.

In delivering such a precisely constructed vision, the player's decisions are necessarily sidelined. *Beowulf* gives the player a few options – actions along a particular line – but you do not personally place Beowulf's hand around the throat of a monster. Instead, the decision of how you dispatch an enemy is made for you – the player merely condones it; Bourne, too, dives under a closing barricade at the game's behest – the player just determines if he succeeds.

The difficulty lies in a three-way balance: delivering abilities that make the player feel empowered, while neither overwhelming the player with complexity nor removing so much control that the player becomes an impotent observer. Nonetheless, it's difficult not to feel that these games have gone too far in predetermining action in a way which may be dramatic but is ultimately contrary to games' fundamental difference from other media – interactivity.

It's one of the ways in which Tale Of Tales' *The Path* proves itself to be a useful criticism of gaming conventions; it relies on AI to determine your avatar's low-level interaction, but your whole game experience comes from a decision to step off the game's titular path. Recently, *BioShock* offered a brilliant exposure of the issues surrounding linearity and control, although it did not have the strength to reject such mechanisms once it had pulled back the curtain.

It's not a problem that will end any time soon – developers will always be conflicted by how they communicate ideas or images: too prescriptive with sequences and set-pieces and you hamper player freedom; too loose in direction and the player might fail to experience anything worthwhile. But the increasing prevalence of QTEs demands with some urgency that games find new ways to deliver narrative, and better equip players with the tools to create their own, no less rich, experience.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM NINJA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2008**

Ninja Gaiden 2

You've got red on you. Ryu Hayabusa sharpens up his act for a 360-exclusive sequel



Ninja Gaiden 2 may still suffer the washed-out look of earlier Team Ninja titles but its scope has unarguably increased. Our question about the game's availability in Germany was ignored by a Microsoft spokesman

Hyabusa's new range of weapons, many of which are now bound to his hands and feet, mean that enemies who so much as look at him are likely to lose something precious

Anyone else would have crawled under a rock after last year, when Tomonobo Itagaki railed against the makers of *Tekken*, dismissed underachieving gamers as 'ninja dogs', then produced the utterly average *Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2*. But there he was, the brains and mouth of Team Ninja, swaggering across the stage at this year's TGS. His trademark braggadocio may have lost some currency over the years, but mention of *Ninja Gaiden* clearly has not.

With many still discovering and returning to 2004's breakneck bloodbath, be it through 360 emulation or PS3's *Sigma* remake, there's no denying the timeliness of announcing a proper sequel. The hardcore, faced with the rise of non-gaming and Japan's laboured uptake of new consoles, are yearning for some old-school pain. *Ninja Gaiden 2*, as you discover from the off, has more than enough to go around.

"I'd like to say that we're not depicting this violence for the fun of it," insists **Yoshifuru Okamoto**, the game's producer. "We want it to actually have meaning inside the game, in terms of the experience. Violence is a key challenge of this project – we don't even think it's possible to alter it. I understand that in Japan we will be Z rated [the dreaded adults-only rating, which effectively brands games as culturally hazardous]. In the US, though, we're confident we'll be an M [for Mature]."

Integral or not, the violence in *Ninja Gaiden* will have you feeling like Lady Macbeth after just five minutes' play. Granted, heads did roll in the first game (in most versions, at least), but this is something else. Ryu Hayabusa's staccato sword-swipes literally chop his opponents to pieces, leaving heads, shoulders, knees and toes in great puddles on the floor. Better – sorry, worse – still is what happens to the pieces left attached: without a hand or foot, for example, enemies will writhe, hobble and hop around until finished off. And like the Black Knight himself, they'll fight you the entire time.

"I think the Xbox 360 has made a unique way of depicting violence possible: how blood is spilt, how the body is dismembered and how the parts remain on the ground"

"The enemy AI changes as he loses an arm or a foot," Okamoto explains. "Our objective is to show cool action right up until the enemy is killed. But our ninja won't search bodies or steal weapons from the dead. Bodies remain solely for the purpose of graphic realism. I think the increased power of Xbox 360 has made a unique way of depicting violence possible: how the blood is spilt, how the body is dismembered and how the parts remain on the ground."

With this in mind, together with an image of Jack Thompson spontaneously

The enemy hierarchy is fundamentally the same as before, with beasts as some of the deadliest. The identity of the final boss is a closely guarded secret, however, and it's unknown if he or she possesses supernatural powers







The pristine Venice stage wasn't the first plan at TGS: a more familiar Japanese stage was originally lined up but, thanks to shots leaking online, a substitute was arranged



Live by the sword

It's something of a relief to learn that Team Ninja, at this early stage, is concentrating almost entirely on the singleplayer aspects of *Ninja Gaiden 2*. The expectations of Live play, especially some form of deathmatch or co-op, are fast becoming a bane of games with stories to tell and action to perfect. "I've been thinking various things concerning online play," says Okamoto, "but I'm not sure this kind of game is suited to a full online experience. I just don't know. What I can say, though, is that the genre of the hero against tons of enemies would have a hard time getting along with the concept of co-op experience. That's my opinion anyway."

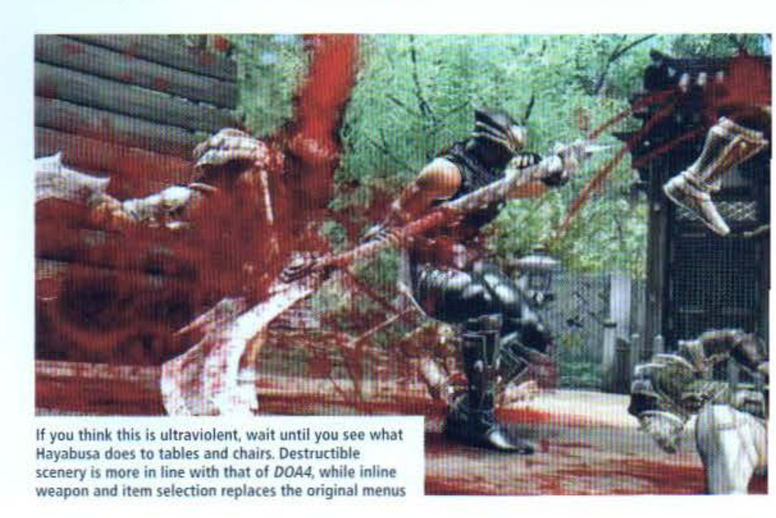
combusting upon sight of it, it's worth pointing out that there is a story beneath the carnage. While Itagaki will doubtless say otherwise during the remaining months of development, Team Ninja is especially keen to expand *Ninja Gaiden*'s audience. "After we released the previous *Ninja Gaiden*," says Okamoto, "we thought about the game and realised that a gap was forming between what we originally wanted and the reaction of the players. It was very much about the difficulty level – and we felt the need for casual gamers to enjoy our game as well."

It's too early for Okamoto to go into detail, but he promises a more intense and 'interesting' game than before, with a wider variety of rival characters and boss battles. Foremost will be a rival ninja to Hayabusa – a nemesis central to the game's events. The proposed enemy types sound a mite familiar – demonic beasts and gun-toting commandos join the usual ninja hit squads – but their attack patterns and strategies, whether grouped or isolated, are more varied. The need to find the right weapon for each challenge, furthermore, will be brutally enforced.

"It all started with the weapons we wanted Hayabusa to carry," says Okamoto, "turning him into some kind of super ninja. This lead us to think about the actions which would fit these weapons, and how that in turn would affect the game's fun factor."

But the problem, as it exists in this early alpha code, is less a question of challenge and intrigue than that old Team Ninja bugbear, visual evolution. You could cut and paste concerns over *Ninja Gaiden 2*'s technology from reviews of either *DOA4* or *DOAX2*: it just doesn't feel particularly modern. Ironically for a game which cuts more flesh than a chef who moonlights as a serial killer, it's disconcertingly clean. Light and shadow effects, for both characters and environments, are quite deficient, leaving some very smooth (60 frames per second) but flat visuals.

He might not have lived under a rock for the last year, but you have to wonder how much Itagaki and his team have isolated themselves from the influence, and more importantly the examples, of other studios' games. Okamoto openly admits to a policy of looking away from 'the competition', and speaks little of conflict with *Devil May Cry 4* because he 'hasn't seen it'. *Ninja Gaiden* will certainly make headline news simply for its gore, and will probably be enjoyable as hell for the masochistic elite. But if it wants to speak to casual gamers as well, then graphics are a language it can't afford to ignore.



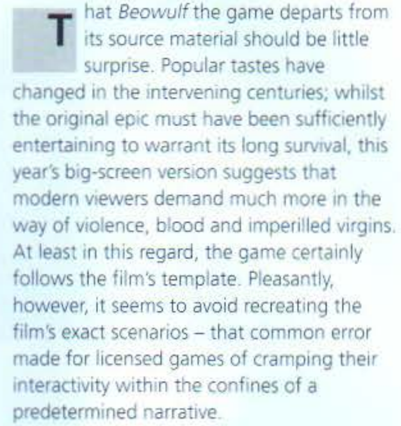
If you think this is ultraviolent, wait until you see what Hayabusa does to tables and chairs. Destructible scenery is more in line with that of *DOA4*, while inline weapon and item selection replaces the original menus

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2008**

Beowulf

Will the glory of the monster-slaying king live on in Ubisoft's gory accompaniment to the film?


The story of Beowulf is a tricky thing to visualise as its primary monsters are described in ambiguous terms – here, Grendel looks like Gollum, but bigger





That *Beowulf* the game departs from its source material should be little surprise. Popular tastes have changed in the intervening centuries; whilst the original epic must have been sufficiently entertaining to warrant its long survival, this year's big-screen version suggests that modern viewers demand much more in the way of violence, blood and imperilled virgins. At least in this regard, the game certainly follows the film's template. Pleasantly, however, it seems to avoid recreating the film's exact scenarios – that common error made for licensed games of cramping their interactivity within the confines of a predetermined narrative.

The decision to set *Beowulf* the game in the years left undescribed by either the film or the poem is a good one, as it frees up Ubisoft's design options. It's a little disappointing that, despite this, the developer has then gone on to create a linear hack 'n' slash. There are inevitable limits this sets on the game's ambition, but at least *Beowulf* does work competently within this genre, and has several pleasing touches – not least in the use of the film's vocal talent to add gravitas to the portentous dialogue. "The beast must be bigger than the giants of Orkney," Brendan Gleeson remarks of a distant monster, setting up Ray Winstone's growled rejoinder: "Then it will spill that much more blood on our boots."

It's a safe bet that Winstone's Beowulf is right about that, as the game revels in gore and incredible violence. The usual light and

Beowulf will snap an ogre's arm before climbing up on the creature's back, pummelling it in the side of its ugly head before prising open its mouth and, finally, pulling its jaw off


In order to get your men to work together efficiently, you have to play a rhythm-action minigame. Stirring drums keep your thanes rowing in unison, steering clear of the rocks

heavy attack combos customary in hack 'n' slash games are bolstered by some truly vicious moves, initiated by grabbing and subduing your opponent with rapid button-hammering. Further options appear, each assigned to a face-button: throw, crush, struggle and steal weapon. With larger enemies, selecting one of these will require a further button-hammering minigame, but the result is satisfactorily gruesome; with ogres, for example, Beowulf will snap its arm before climbing up on the creature's back, pummelling it in the side of its ugly head before prising open its mouth and, finally, pulling its jaw off.

Although delightfully grisly, *Beowulf*'s various attacks have a further gameplay impact. Stringing together combo-attacks impresses your men, and a morale meter slowly fills, allowing you to perform rallying cries which bolster the strength of your accompanying forces. However, when taking damage or grappling with the enemy, another gauge fills up: your carnal rage. When full, you become an unstoppable force – the damage your enemies take multiplies but your own men become vulnerable to







This 'cult bitch', as Beowulf uncharitably titles her, is one of the game's less canonical enemies – apparently some kind of voodoo priestess with the voice of the Bride of Dracula. You must foil her evil plans to sacrifice virgins











your sweeping blows, and it becomes difficult to direct your attacks solely against your foes.

You need to keep an eye on these two gauges and, periodically, exploit both extremes: although the bulk of the enemy is usually made up of low-level foes which can be dispatched with heroic combos, the larger creatures need the boost of carnal fury simply in order to execute the killing moves. Similarly, you'll need a high morale to complete objectives that require the co-operation of your thanes, rallying your men via a rhythm-action minigame to row in unison, or roll a huge rock to cover the enemy's spawn-point.

At the end of each level your successes and failures are totted up – how many of your own thanes you helped, how many kills were made using carnal fury or heroic combos – the results go on to determine the development of your kingdom and the attitude of your kinsmen towards you. We have yet to see how involved this role-playing element will be, but it has the potential to be more than just window dressing; the kingdom to which you return between missions acts as a hub in which you can make changes to the formation and load-out of your soldiers.

We hope the kingdom conceals further interesting gameplay challenges that elevate Beowulf above the hack-and-slash genre – although the title will inevitably sell well on the back of the movie, critically it faces a challenge. Its own merits aside, the last generational technology leap has seemingly prompted a surge of titles eager to exploit the possibility of displaying large numbers of enemies. The most obvious genre to benefit from this is the hack 'n' slash and, duly, there are many on their way. With titles like *Conan* already doing a more than serviceable job, and the ambitious *Viking* looking set to exceed the genre's conventions, *Beowulf* will need to excel in its differences in order to impress rather than simply rely on gimmicks to add flavour.





Beowulf offers some extravagantly vicious moves which are unique to the creature you're fighting. This ogre may have to be on soft foods for a while after this encounter



Damsel fly

There are some minor attempts to mix up the gameplay; one sequence sees you attempt to protect a number of buxom sacrificial virgins from being tossed into a pit. It requires use of a little careful time management to select and kill the right ogres before they drag the screaming maiden to the precipice – but even with the balance of heroism and carnal rage, on the whole, *Beowulf*'s various elements don't really cohere into a particularly tactical game.





Apparently, Bourne's new backstory has been given the go ahead from original author Robert Ludlum himself, and the films' screenwriter Tony Gilroy has been involved

Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy

High Moon ups the bloodshed as it cherry-picks from the various incarnations of the rough-and-ready spy franchise

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **HIGH MOON STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2 2008**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E178**



My little eye

Though intended as a different beast to other Bourne-branded products, the game clearly attempts to recreate much of the style of the films. At points, when Bourne's flight across a rooftop is being followed by a sniper, the camera will cut to a view down the scope. How the controls account for this change in perspective will be crucial to the game's coherence – though it certainly evokes the drama of the films, you wonder how the player will know where he's going.

High Moon Studios is quick to state that its game has been designed as a third tier to the Bourne franchise, accompanying the books and films rather than pursuing them. The fact that it avoids using the likeness of Matt Damon is a point in High Moon's favour and, while the game recreates the introduction to Bourne seen in both the books and films, it seems that it then diverges.

Opening with the amnesiac and bullet-riddled Bourne floating unconscious in the sea, the first section of the game involves his attempts to discover more about his identity. It will be familiar to those who've seen the films, and as things go wrong for Bourne at the American embassy in Switzerland it helps to establish two of the three pillars of gameplay: hand-to-hand combat and evasion. A timer ticks down to total lockdown, and Bourne slides under closing security gates with a quick button-press. It's difficult to tell exactly where the distinction lies between the player's direct control of Bourne and the many cinematic moments where the interaction is limited to timed button-presses. Part of the difficulty in distinguishing this is due to the smart dynamic camera system that makes quick cuts on the fly, recreating the films' energy.

It's a system that adds considerable visual sheen to the combat, even if it prompts concern over the degree to which the player is actually involved in making in-game decisions. While fighting, a gauge builds up with every combo, allowing you to execute increasing numbers of contextual takedowns – High Moon has worked to create different moves for every inch of the environment and they mimic the speed, brutality and ingenuity of the films, with Bourne often employing mundane objects to vicious effect. With a full gauge and multiple aggressors, you can execute a series of cinematically framed takedowns in slow-motion – quick button presses once again determining your success at, rather than the nature of, the sequence.



While in other areas direct control of Bourne looks to be limited, the gunplay promises to be involving and uses a cover system akin to that seen in *Gears Of War* – from whence the game's engine also originates

The third component of the game's action is gunplay – which may be a surprise to fans, as Bourne's defining feature has thus-far been his reliance on more low-tech methods. However, High Moon has contrived a decent enough excuse for the game's considerably higher body-count by setting much of it in Bourne's past – as an assassin, Bourne's missions are continually botched by bad intelligence, leading to the kind of excessive carnage that initiates his eventual breakdown. Such action is not separate from the game's other principles of evasion and hand-to-hand, however: each element runs fluidly into the other.

With every successive viewing *Bourne* certainly looks better and better, but we do worry that these looks may be coming at the expense of the player's ability to direct the action. As pleasing as it might be to see Bourne dispatch an enemy with a pen, it will only be empowering if the player is involved in the decision to do so – cinematics initiated by button prompts are anathema to gaming's strength of interactivity.



The combat's fast-cuts convey the economy of motion employed in the martial art of Kali – the choreographer used for the films has been used here to authentically recreate their action





Turok

Extinction was on the agenda, but the old fossil's got some life yet

Turok's TGS demo begins at a crash site. You're instructed to check the wreckage with your team, and begin moving through the thigh-high grass towards the smoke. An enemy soldier appears, and you take him down relatively easily. Two others appear near the wreckage and begin moving towards you, using cover and firing. Their shots fly by, you're in usual FPS combat mode, and then something out of the ordinary happens: the grass begins moving. Suddenly, dinosaurs are everywhere.

They run at the enemy, they run at your teammates, they run at you. The grass obscures them until they're within leaping distance, and you frantically backpedal, firing blindly into the foliage – but one flanks and sends you flying before savagely jumping on top of your prostrate body. The camera quickly changes to thirdperson and you barely fight it off, your hands clamping its jaws shut while you desperately kick it in the stomach.



Using your squadmates is a big part of the game, and occasionally sacrificing them to help your own progress looks like a necessary evil, at least in the early stages

The AI of the human enemies is convincing. Combat with individuals is an instinctive mix of ducking and bobbing around the foliage and cover, using the environment to obscure yourself and easily picking a few off. But in groups they're lethal: accurate fire pins your location, they advance quickly and purposefully, and when you try the same manoeuvre twice they'll punish you for it. The dinosaurs, on the other hand, are straightforwardly vicious, hunting in packs and attacking quickly – though not always directly. It's not uncommon to see two or three different grass trails heading at you, and have a nasty feeling there are another few offscreen.

This is why *Turok* has the potential to be a great game: both types of enemies are deadly and clearly different in their tactics, and solo are just about beatable. Together, they're formidable, and so a great deal of your strategy has to be coaxing them into confrontation with each other, letting each side wear down before getting involved yourself. Get caught in the middle, and you're dead.

The only black marks right now are against the graphics, which are sometimes rudimentary by today's standards: the grass in particular is well animated, but blocky and rough-looking up close. Enemies also occasionally appear from a location that you've scanned as clear. Such issues should be taken care of in the remainder of development, although the latter point is grudgingly admissable given the game's dependence on shocking you out of lulls. All things considered, *Turok* is looking good, and an essential reinvention of a series that'd become somewhat irrelevant.



The world showcases some bizarre human foes, but the true stars will be the hulking T-rex and fellow carnivores – it's hard to imagine that popgun making much of an impact

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TOUCHSTONE STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **PROPAGANDA GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**



Twentieth century boy

***Turok* is set in the 'near future', and you take the role of Joseph Turok, the latest in the lineage of dino hunters. The plot revolves around his ex-mentor, Roland Kane, a war criminal who has been chased down to the planet where the game is set. And naturally, he has an army protecting him. The dinosaurs are native to the planet (the comics have featured 'bionisaurs', altered by humans with implants) and will include herbivorous and non-threatening species as well as flesh-hunters – of which raptors, carnotaurus, and (of course) the T-rex have so far been seen.**









Once again, Nights' purpose is to help two troubled youths overcome their fears. The fish-like Girania, above, can be turned into a cloud of coloured balls – by looping these you destroy them, and Girania becomes smaller

Nights: Journey Of Dreams

Finally, we get to see if Nights' purple leotard still fits after all these years

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **E178, E181**

With Sega seemingly nervous about letting the press get too close to the controls at Leipzig, it has been a tortuous wait to see just how faithfully the classic game for the Saturn has been revisited. The original action adventure pioneered use of an analogue stick to direct the androgynous jester, Nights, in an aerial ballet through lush, vibrant dreamscapes; although these were 3D, Nights only had freedom of movement within a single plane, his aerobatic loops and dives only determining his height and distance along a preset path.

The forthcoming recreation for the Wii gives you the choice to control Nights either with the Remote or by a combination of Remote and Nunchuk. The former uses the Remote as a pointing device, directing Nights towards a star on the screen, and the latter uses the analogue stick to direct Nights and the Remote's motion sensitivity to execute special moves. The first surprising thing is that, when using the Nunchuk, Nights' angle of flight is not fluidly determined by the analogue stick, but seemingly restricted to the eight compass-point directions with little more freedom than that which could be expressed on a D-pad and, given the focus on aerobatics, the result is that his control feels oddly jerky.

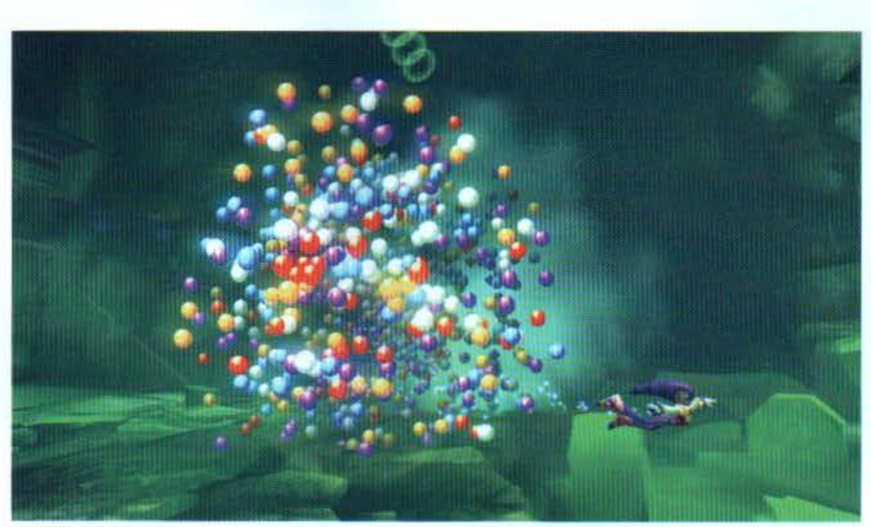
In most other respects, however, *Journey Of Dreams* lovingly recreates the original's experience, furthering the game's essential exuberance through its vibrant graphics and exhilarating, joyous soundtrack. Sega has added to the traditional formula, too; there is now a greater variance in the objectives of each level, requiring you to collect items from enemies and, towards the end of a level's flightpath, the point of view moves behind Nights, allowing you to control movement more like a conventional flying game. There are new sections that break up the more conventional challenges – a boating section sees Nights rescue friendly creatures from a river, and another features a rollercoaster, the player extending the cart's four legs, Wacky Races-style, in order to collect objects littered around the path.

Though the slight clunkiness of the controls gives us pause, this latest incarnation looks set to build on the nostalgia that many hold for the original title. The question is whether this will be enough to establish itself as a success with the Wii's expanded audience. Though it fondly recalls the highly saturated visuals of many a Sega classic, they certainly don't compete with those of *Mario Galaxy* and you may well wonder if Nights' restricted flightpath will baffle new gamers as much as it delights those who remember its original incarnation.



Inflate me and play

***Journey Of Dreams*' boss encounters are a mixture of old and new ideas – of the three we've seen so far, two were similar to creatures in Nights' original outing – a balloon monster, which you latch on to and propel through a series of gates, and a giant toothsome fish. The remaining boss was a more novel proposition – a chameleon that conceals himself behind the background through which you can cut circular chunks by performing loops.**







If you choose, you can roam the levels on foot as one of the two rather uncanny-looking children, but you are more vulnerable in this state than when playing as Nights

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **READY AT DAWN STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2008 (US), TBC (EUROPE)**

God Of War: Chains Of Olympus

The sleek Greek killing machine is back, and ready to carve up throats on the small screen





Quibbling rivalry

The mystique around the game is that it should elaborate on Kratos' motivation for his actions in the subsequent games, and the most obvious storyline from that series perspective would be the appearance of his brother. The latter features in the background of the first game but hasn't yet made a fully-fledged appearance, thanks in large part to the fact he's dead, but a promise has been made of a trip to Hades. It's hardly going to be Dido and Aeneas, but the game has licence to elaborate upon these vague references in the finest mythological fashion, so sibling rivalry in the underworld will hopefully turn out to have some impact upon the game's story.







There's something that's appealing about the *God Of War* series beyond its combat and central mechanics. It's the setting: Greek myth has such a mix of heroism and humanity, is so full of the classic archetypes for all stories, that it provides a tremendously compelling backdrop for a videogame – especially, and appropriately, a brutally violent one. Another part of myth is vagueness, events that can only be hinted at and must always be pieced together at a distance from the event. Before *God Of War* makes a blockbuster return on PS3, Ready At Dawn Studios (previously behind the accomplished *Daxter* spin-off on PSP) is going to investigate a hidden part of the myth-kitty on the small screen.

God Of War: Chains Of Olympus is a prequel to the original. It chronicles the decade of servitude that Kratos gave the gods of Olympus and begins in Attica, watching a fleet of Persian ships invade. It is one of the most remarkable looking games yet seen on the PSP: there is a huge amount of detail in the vista, with burning ships part of a much larger fleet and multiple parts of the background operating independently.

Despite the difference in setting, the section played through was very similar to the opening of the first game, so similar in fact it could almost be taken as a tribute act. There are all the familiar attacks and fluent movement between targets, with one or two new additions such as a very useful chain move that sweeps entire groups of enemies in front and behind out of the way. There are a few enemies to take care of, some controls to learn, and then a cyclops bursts through the door. There is a humorous original touch here, where after you've won a QTE (it tries to crush you immediately) you separate and prepare for the fight, before a huge basilisk smashes through the wall behind and simply eats him. The basilisk then goes for you, and the remainder of the section operates in a similar way to the Hydra fights of the original game: the animation and graphical effects are leagues ahead of the original, however, as the screen-filling head moves in and out, breathing fire and sweeping across the large horizontal view the PSP offers.

Series trademarks also crop up, such as the in-engine cutscenes that move in and around the city to show the level of detail in the environment, and some suspiciously blank sections of the level where loading is obviously occurring. Tougher enemies also appear, like the King of Persia, who uses magic against you which you can then claim after brutally mashing his head with a treasure chest. There are more pleasant touches such as the basilisk running away after your first encounter, then catching glimpses of him in the background of Attica moving through and destroying more of the city as you progress.

As ever, the game features QTEs for everything from opening a door to hitting a basilisk on the head with a column, and though hardly onerous, they're familiar. It would be good to see the game as a whole adopt a little more originality in interpreting the series' conventions





The Attica level follows the templates laid out so well by the original, and is full of effective scripted moments – the ships in the background destory the scenery, the cyclops destroys walls



FORMAT: **PS3, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEJ**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

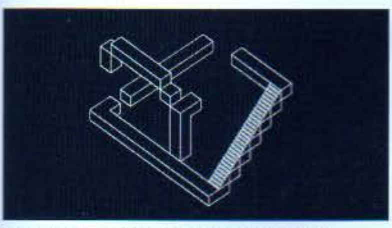
Echochrome

A game built around impossible objects, with possible problems

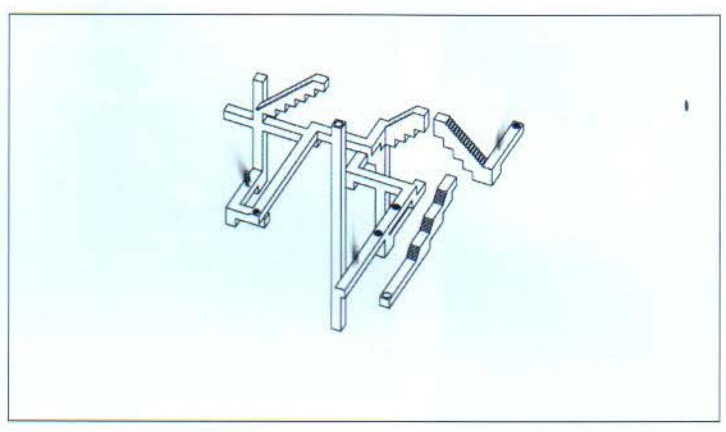
Echochrome, at the moment, is a flawed novelty – with the potential to become a very good game if some faults are ironed out. The game's world is constructed of, essentially, impossible objects that have the illusion of 3D but operate on a 2D plane. A figure walks around the stage automatically, and you rotate the stage to create optical illusions and coherences that will allow it to negotiate the environment in previously-impossible ways. You can connect loose corners, make the figure land on a surface that seems some distance away (if he hits it on the 2D plane), and 'hide' empty space by moving the level to cover it – thus allowing the figure to walk over that space.

The game clicks into place relatively quickly, with a black figure (the 'echo') appearing at certain stages of the level, which you then have to guide the white figure to, which causes the echo to reappear elsewhere on the structure. The simple tasks to begin with work perfectly well, and on this basic level *Echochrome* is very gratifying and well-executed. However, when you become more ambitious in attempts to solve puzzles, certain 'solutions' simply won't work. It becomes clear there are a limited number of ways to solve the puzzles 'correctly', and it will baffle as to why the game rejects others that seem consistent to its rules. Fundamentally, *Echochrome* contradicts its own weird logic, and breaks its own spell over the player.

Added to this, rotating the level sometimes feels a little slow, particularly as you can't slow down or stop the figure walking – which leads to some frustrating moments, particularly when it turns around, and you then have to begin a different rotation so it doesn't fall off or move to an undesirable location. These difficulties of logic and controls may just be teething troubles, and fixed by the final version, but at the moment *Echochrome* is looking like an occasionally charming and often frustrating diversion.



***Echochrome*'s mechanic is obvious in motion, but somewhat less so on paper: in essence, the gap at the top of this level could be bridged by rotating the level so that the two separate edges overlapped on the 2D plane, at which point they would join and allow the figure to walk between them on the 3D plane. It works, honestly**





There are some highly innovative methods of solving levels, such as moving a column in front of a gap, which will allow the walker to pass over the gap because it can no longer be seen

Patapon

SCEJ fuses bemani with tribal warfare

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEJ**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Pata pata pata pon. Pon pon pata pon. Those are two of the beats that will be hard to remove from your head after playing this quite excellent 2D side scroller from SCE Japan and the creators of *LocoRoco*. You control a flag bearer, who can construct chants that will direct an ever-increasing army of, basically, walking eyes. Time it correctly and, as you beat, they shout and respond to the instructions – each combination produces a set effect – and it is possible to move the army through the levels smoothly and flawlessly, racking up a huge combo in the process.

The first level is a simple affair to familiarise you with the controls, and as you move through a fierce dragon gives chase. It's no great threat, but keeping your small squad ahead takes some skill in measuring the beats out neither too early nor late. Later levels become more complex, demanding frequent changes of the beat while maintaining forward momentum (which also has to be directed by chanting), and it's here you begin missing opportunities and confusing the troops (who respond with a little 'wha?'). It suggests both a sizeable challenge, and provides, in contrast to *LocoRoco*'s frequent lack of it, a sense of constant interaction.

Special mention must be made of *Patapon*'s graphic style: clean, bright and thick lines differentiate obstacles extremely well. Combined with the excellent audio, it never feels anything less that polished, and with an engaging central mechanic. Whether it can sustain this charm over extended play is yet to be seen, but it was a high point for Sony at TGS.





Your army can be bewitching to watch in action, and in the battles are endearingly brave – it always feels tragic when one of them falls. The inspired design of the enemies, meanwhile, speaks for itself







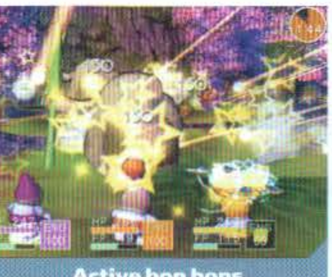
For the most part, *Patapon* has its own striking and distinctive look, but in some of the levels and character animations the fact that *LocoRoco*'s creators are behind it is obvious

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (JAPAN), TBC (EUROPE)**

Opoona

Newsflash: Nunchuks now safe for children, but they may prefer bon bons

The enemies are an appealingly mixed bunch, with names like 'Forest Wonder' and 'Gourmet Duck', and the general integration of classically beautiful scenery with chunky futuristic technology feels refreshingly well handled



Active bon bons

In battle, the 'active bon bon battle system' comes into play, whereby Opoona throws the orange bon bon that floats above his head: this is sparked by an arced motion of the Nunchuk (that can also be swerved to hit multiple foes), and is your primary method of attack against the nasties you'll be facing. Opoona's family have their own bon bons above their rounded heads (apart from his little brother, who has bon bon legs instead), and his allies all have some variation on the system. 'Throwing' the Nunchuk is responsive, although it was hard to tell how detailed the swerve could be – and whether hitting multiple opponents needed furious waving, or careful aiming.



The gameworld is full of characters and terminals that provide the usual RPG functions of offering you information towards your next objective or an alternative task to fulfil

Opoona is a Wii game developed by another of the seemingly limitless JRPG 'dream teams', this time under the aegis of Koei. Shintaro Majima and Sachiko Yukimura, *Dragon Quest* veterans, head up art design and planning respectively, while for *Final Fantasy* fans Hitoshi Sakimoto is scoring the game. But in stark contrast to the highly traditional and visually sumptuous epics that other teams are producing, *Opoona* is, initially at least, an understated affair – and all the more refreshing for it.

The game's plot seems to cue up a relatively straightforward RPG, concentrating on the young Opoona's quest to find his family who have mysteriously disappeared. In the usual fashion, he meets up with some like-minded companions and they go through the adventure together. But *Opoona* has another layer beyond this, in that you can quite happily forget about your family and the main adventure, and concentrate on living in the various colonies you find yourself in throughout the game. In one sense this is highly guided, because 'licenses', acquired through proficiency in a particular job, are necessary to move freely between the colonies, and could be accused of simply replacing the 'dragon's eye key' or somesuch. But in another respect it places the emphasis on Opoona as a member of a society within which he must find a niche – you can choose the occupations you want to specialise in – while continuing an overarching quest. In this respect it's somewhat akin to grand epics like *Shenmue*, but *Opoona* is dedicated first and foremost to simplicity and ease of access for players of all abilities.



This can be seen most clearly in the controls, which use just the Nunchuk. One button opens the status screen to view items and the like, while the other allows Opoona to use various items he has selected, and the analogue stick moves him around the environments. It feels slightly strange to only be using the Nunchuk when it has to be connected to the Wii Remote regardless, almost a return to the dark days of wired controllers, but after a short period it's a comfortable and responsive system – and the brilliantly named 'active bon bon battle system' (see boxout) is an involving touch.

Opoona is a singular title among the software appearing on the Wii, and its quiet innovations and serious (and successful) effort to offer simple controls within an RPG interface are worthy of some notice. In the ever-disappointing absence of the likes of *Mother* from western shores, it would be a pity if *Opoona*'s similar candy colourings and slightly odd elements stop Koei from releasing the game outside of Japan.

The visual design of Opoona and his world is very appealing – the Wii does seem to work best with bold designs that combine bright colour with relatively little detail



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

Devil May Cry 4

Hell is looking even more heavenly as Nero fiddles and Dante's inferno burns

Devil May Cry 4 is brash, beautiful, and a huge amount of fun to play. It's also a little disappointing, seeming like little more than a cosmetic upgrade from *DMC3*. Playable at TGS was an entire level as Nero: running through, areas would be cordoned off by familiar red glowing walls, enemies dropped in, and fighting began. It's the same as always, with a few new moves, and knocking foes around and racking up combos is easy for a *DMC* veteran (or, frankly, even for a newcomer).

The locations are beautiful, of course, but seem very narrow in scope – as you pass through a wrecked town with demons merrily jumping on cars and running through the streets, you can't leap over the two-foot barrier to fight them (despite executing a 100-foot jump in the previous room), but have to merely watch the animations play out. This sequence showed another of the game's problems – after clearing the previous section, Nero enters a door, a loading screen appears, and the cutscene showing demons and cars begins. It ends, you move Nero past the balcony and about ten steps, and then there's another door and loading screen. It's highly disjointed in this sense, moving from the smooth and stylish fighting to needless cutscenes and frequent loading screens.

But overall the combat is why *DMC* works, and it works as effectively as ever in this iteration. It looks great, plays well, and will no doubt sell loads of copies. You just wish Capcom would address a few pacing and inconsistency niggles.



Even among the current generation's beauties, the architecture and detail of *DMC4*'s baroque scenery stand out as some exceptional achievements

Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword

Like the initials, Tecmo's series fits perfectly on to the DS

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM NINJA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

Ninja Gaiden DS may seem to be a world away from its big brother, but it shares one crucial characteristic: it is a dream to control. It adapts what by now must be known as the '*Phantom Hourglass* interface': Ryu responds to your stylus, following a pointer around and attacking enemies according to the direction and number of your stokes, into trademark *Ninja Gaiden* combat without skipping a beat.

It is simplicity itself – a vertical stroke becomes a vertical sword stroke, a horizontal stroke becomes a horizontal sword stroke, combining the two has the obvious effect, and tapping on enemies throws shuriken at them. Special moves are activated by building up a combo meter and then 'drawing' a Sanskrit character while the action pauses. If completed successfully, the spell can then be guided around the screen. Ryu moves quickly and fluidly, zipping from opponent to opponent (we saw up to five onscreen at any one time) and destroying them with a few well-placed strikes.

The camera angles are typically high above the environments (which are prerendered rather than fully 3D), removing any possibility for confusion, although for a red dragon boss it switched to a view behind Ryu that tracked the opponent's moves but occasionally lost sight of him. However, the immediacy of the controls allied to the fluidity of the combat will make this, barring disasters, one of the most intuitive and enjoyable action experiences on DS.









The DS is held vertically and only the touchscreen is used for the main action (the other display showing a map), allowing some panoramic moments above foes – the levels also tend to be of various heights and layers rather than horizontal width, and still allow for some fast and efficient movement





The graphical achievements of *No More Heroes* are considerable, particularly in the context of many other third-party efforts for the Wii, but even more exciting is the wide range of distinctive environments thus seen





No More Heroes

Whatever happened to all the heroes, all the Shakespearos?

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2008**

Suda 51 has a CV that both inspires and terrifies: while there's no doubt that *Killer 7* was one of the more offbeat and imaginative titles of the recent past, it's been accused of having more mouth than trousers. *No More Heroes* is looking to address that with a mixture of style obsession and lightsaber combat, bringing more foundation to go with the visual impact.

The game begins with Travis Touchdown, a loser otaku, who wins a beamsword in an online auction and (naturally) kills a local assassin, Helter Skelter, with it. Following this, he is ranked 11th among the assassins currently operating in *No More Heroes*' world, and sets off to find the other ten and make himself number one. While the story is typically unpredictable, the game's basic ten-boss structure might not seem so. Until you realise that *No More Heroes* takes inspiration from (of all games) *Shenmue*. It's set in a free-roaming city where you can search out missions and day jobs en route to the ten assassins, such as making yourself a garbage collector and other part-time jobs. Travis can move through the city on foot or on his distinctive Schpel Tiger, a monster bike that looks extremely desirable indeed, and is simply built for high speeds and drift turns.

The combat is the crux of *No More Heroes*, however, and it was here that the recent TGS demo focused. Travis' beamsword is used by pressing the 'A' button and swishing the Wii Remote when prompted for a finisher, but any sense of having a very powerful weapon is somewhat dulled by the fact that your enemies take lots and lots of hits to down. Quite in contrast to the trailers that show foes being split in two easily and losing their heads, in practice it feels less like a glowing arc of destructive energy than a nerf stick.

The demo was admittedly quite limited in scope, consisting of a warehouse where several baddies were roaming, waiting to be endlessly pummelled with your fists, feet and beamsword, and it quickly proved slightly repetitious. Relief was occasionally provided by violent and visually impressive special moves, with explosive confetti-like endings for the enemies (see boxout), triggered after a number of combos were strung together and by following large blocky arrows on the screen with the Remote. The combat does promise more depth than this showing, however, with an emphasis on switching between the three stances (by holding the Remote at different heights) while keeping the sword charged up: it may be that a short demo is not the place for such intricacies to be shown at their best. What it did show off to its full effect, however, was the animation for sword recharging (achieved by hitting the '1' button and shaking), which is surely destined for some kind of infamy.

Needless to say, the game is visually distinct, with a dazzling combination of sharp edges, cel-shading and, for want of a better term, geek attitude. This is manifested most obviously in Travis himself, who can be dressed up in a huge array of different costumes (there are over 100 separate designs for his T-shirt alone), while the city has a grim urban aesthetic underlying all sorts of neon cool, from police tape and yellow sunglasses to the fly-posters that decorate the walls. Overall, *No More Heroes* is technically competent and graphically creative, with just a few combat elements needing tweaking to ensure it doesn't slip behind the standards of its sometimes brilliant, sometimes flawed, always distinguished elder brother.



Enemies come with various types of weapons that affect their fighting style, and standoff moments become a test of your Remote reflexes. Shall we call this the Wii QTE?





No plot details have been released outside of the game's beginnings, but Travis seems to have a sizeable roster of friends and foes quite apart from the cannon fodder



Oh no! I hope this isn't Chris's blood!

The initial trailers of *No More Heroes* showed extremely violent combat, with heads flying and bodies sliced with gay abandon. However, the recent TGS demo showcased a much more visually imaginative and, frankly, enjoyable effect whereby enemies' limbs and torsos exploded into shards of black pixels and odd round shapes. Unfortunately, it seems that this version is reserved for Japan (where the laws on violence are still remarkably strict) and that those of us in Europe and the US will get the gory version. Time to start the internet petitions.

Time Crisis 4

You know how it goes: shoot, shoot, shoot, duck, reload, shoot, etc, etc

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **NEX ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

The plots of videogames are wonderful things sometimes. *Time Crisis 4* begins with two agents sent to investigate black-market arms dealing. After being assaulted at an airport, escaping in a helicopter and shooting through the streets, the baddies gradually become bioweapons, one of them has a magnificent 'weapon arm' with all sorts of functions including a tractor beam, and it turns out that all along it was an attempted coup against the US government. Great stuff.

It's all completely irrelevant, of course. *Time Crisis 4* revolves around shooting a lot of baddies, then moving slightly forward whereupon another slew of baddies appear, and repeating these actions ad infinitum through various different locations. Described like that, it's a wonder that *Time Crisis* is so much fun to play. It's breathless, the situations get progressively more ludicrous in their setups and the enemies get tougher as you move on. In a very small niche, it's peerless game design and Nex Entertainment has only tweaked the formula minimally – such as allowing limited control over your movement and firing position behind certain bits of cover, and adding a grip to the G-Con 3 so the gun can be comfortably held with one hand or both.

The G-Con 3 will ship with the game, and is very similar in form and function to its predecessors, although an improved method of targeting makes it compatible with modern TVs (the Guncon 2 was only capable of working with CRT screens). Some games need changing over the generations, but *Time Crisis* doesn't – you know exactly what the game will be like, what it will do, and whether you'll enjoy it. Bullseye.



As ever, it's easy to slip into lulls and forget about the ever-ticking timer at bottom right that means game over







You have several guns that can be switched between when in cover, though it is essential to conserve their ammo for the everyday challenges – such as a few pursuing choppers in the financial district

Space Invaders Extreme

With longevity like this, these invaders could show Lazarus a thing or two







FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **TAITO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**



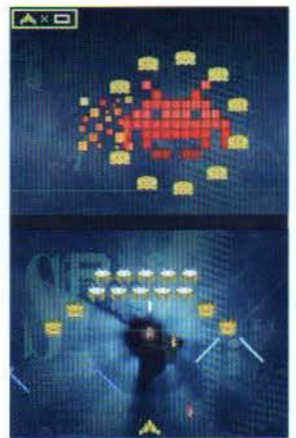
The formations and attack patterns of these invaders bear little relation to the originals (barring the frequent tribute moments when they slip into it), and their speedy loops and divebombing will see a few humiliating deaths

The historical importance of *Space Invaders* is a fact, but over the years successive remakes that did little other than replace the coloured strips of plastic with coloured pixels have perhaps tarnished the game experience somewhat. It is thus a great joy to play *Space Invaders Extreme*, a game that has taken the core element of the original and mixed in umpteen new tricks learned from modern shooters, creating a thoroughly new take on the series.



The most obvious inspirations are the likes of *Lumines* and *Every Extend Extra*: as the invaders descend, your shots add sound effects that correspond to the music, creating an aural accompaniment to your shooting that complements the action perfectly. The invaders do move in the time-honoured fashion, but they have other patterns and – most crucially – clearing one wave simply throws another directly at you, with no pause for a new screen or level. It's a thoughtless experience at times, in the sense that you'll be so concentrated on firing and dodging that the game and effects become all-consuming.

There are new weapons, new enemies, different ways to dispatch enemies for different bonuses, huge boss sprites surrounded by personal bodyguard waves of invaders that take up the top screen of the DS, and very well-realised bonus levels that are as compelling and challenging as the main shooting. From first sight, this is already looking like a definitive reworking of the classic, and will hopefully bring it pulsating and firing into the present.



Firing over the DS bridge is frequently incorporated and may initially see a few bad shots, but it's quickly second nature



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **DIGITAL EXTREMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

Dark Sector

A game with a familiar mechanic that's not so much dark as empty

Unfortunately, *Dark Sector* gave a bad showing at TGS. Initially, it's almost impressive, but it wears its love for *Gears Of War* on both shoulders. And the rest of its body too.

Next to such a fluid one-button control method, *Dark Sector* stumbles badly, making interactions with scenery and combat almost exactly the same, but needlessly altering the controls. Having to press A to cover then being prompted continually to press B to vault over that cover seems like a pointlessly clumsy change for the sake of it. If you're going to rip off a good game mechanic noted for its fluidity and ease of use, it needs to be done properly.

Combat is irksome because of the camera's habit of going haywire when you're in cover and trying to sweep the battlefield, and this frequently results in your getting flanked or shot in moments of mechanical confusion. Graphically, it's perfectly passable, but in motion enemies frequently repeat moves and animations. When in combat, they respond well to your staying in one place, covering and firing, but are very slow to respond to movement at times and others are just plain stupid – in our session, one enemy flanked successfully, but rather than shooting took 'cover' in the open.

At the moment, *Dark Sector* is a poor quality clone of a better game, and most of the things it does well are a result of its Unreal engine rather than good design. It will need a very strong finish to development to stand a chance of being worthy of its inspiration.



The distinguishing characteristic of *Dark Sector* is the protagonist's arm, which has several different functions that allow a variety of special attacks on your enemies







The interior architecture of the locations seems slightly familiar, particularly the likes of open courtyards and long 'corridors' through streets. It's all highly unoriginal



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

Rez HD

The cult on-rails beat-shooter returns on XBLA

Microsoft announced during the Tokyo Game Show that Tetsuya Mizuguchi's famed rail shooter *Rez* will be coming to Live Arcade. *Rez HD* is a straight port of the Dreamcast original into widescreen 720p and 5.1 sound. Though it keeps its five levels and various play modes intact, Mizuguchi claims it fulfils his initial vision for the game: sharp, wide, no jaggies.

Most games benefit from a darkened room and the sound turned up, but these were intrinsic to the *Rez* experience – that of pounding bass that allied perfectly with its pulsing visuals and an almost instinctive targeting of chains of enemies – and one that the move up to 360 will gratifyingly amplify. And, hopefully, also make up for the lack of new levels.

Regardless, it's testament to *Rez*'s superlative art design that it looks just as vital, radical and alluring in 2007 as it did on release in 2001. Yes, high definition certainly helps, but all that extra clarity demonstrates just how perfectly defined its vectors, textures and planes were from the very start.

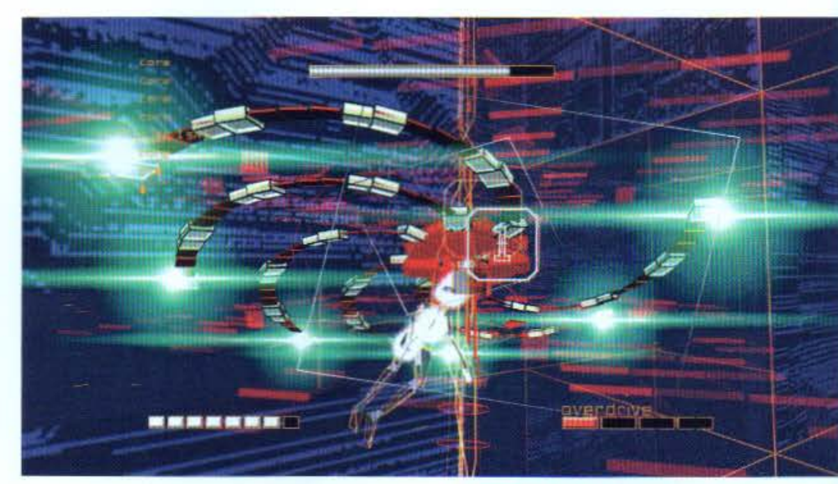
Though originally released amid cries that it was a piece of 'synaesthetic' art, *Rez* didn't sell particularly well. Perhaps the low-cost distribution Live Arcade offers might finally give it proper return, but it seems to be a move that Mizuguchi himself has instigated: he claims Q Entertainment had to buy the licence back from Sega.

The announcement came alongside news that Q Entertainment is also working on a version of *Every Extend Extra*, suffixed *Extreme*, for XBLA, as well as ports of Treasure's *Ikaruga*, Taito's *Exit* and Warashi's *Triggerheart Exelica*.





It looked good at the time, but high definition lends *Rez*'s fine graphic details even greater impact. It's remarkable how fresh it still looks compared to new titles





***Rez* was distinct for a fulsome roster of extra 'levels', play modes and avatars, which would unlock over time. Surely it wouldn't hurt Q to add in one or two new secrets?**



Photography: **Hiroki Izumi**

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

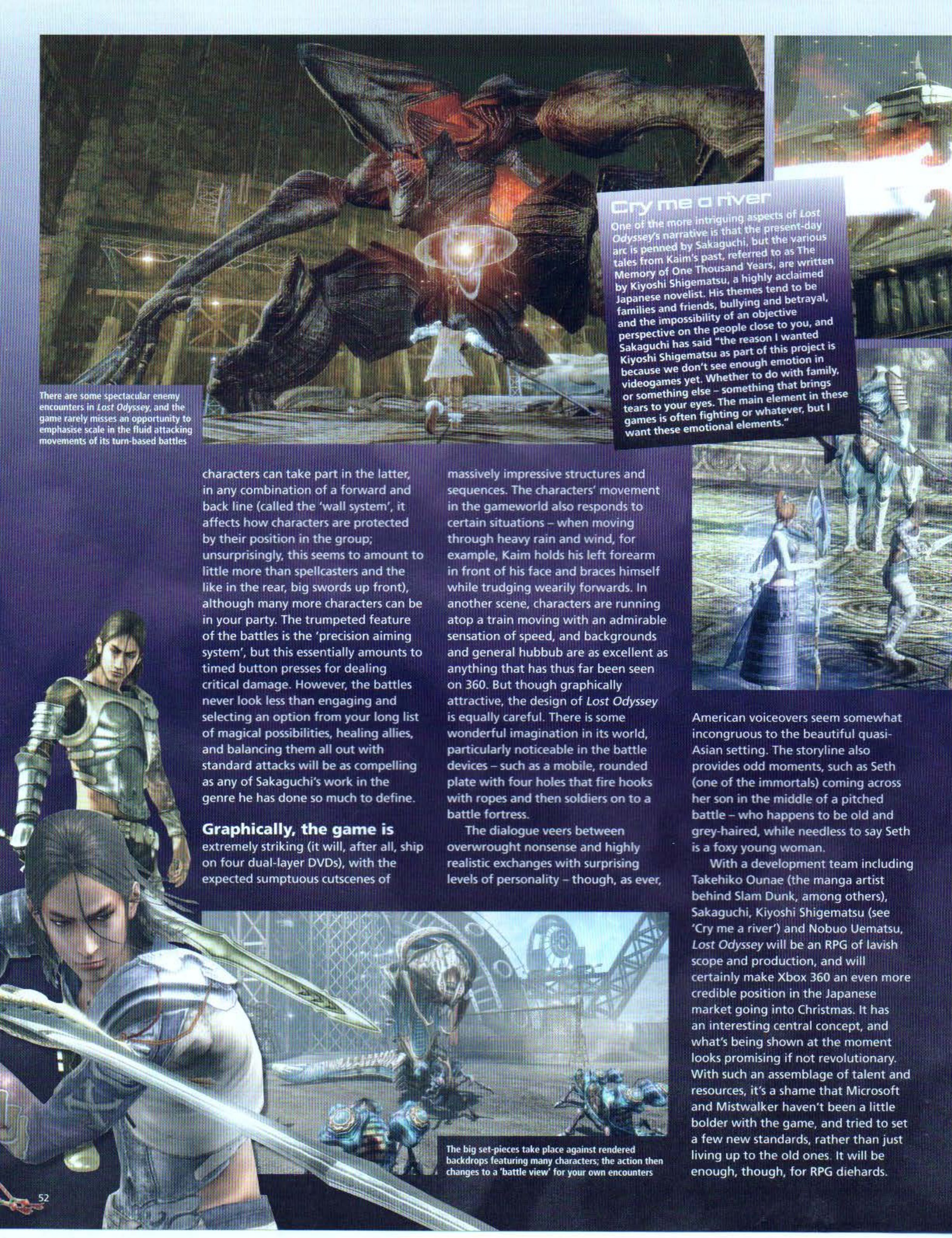
Mistwalker's Hironobu Sakaguchi talks Lost Odyssey and the rise of Xbox 360 in Japan

TITLE: **LOST ODYSSEY**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER (JAPAN), FEBRUARY 2008 (EUROPE, US)**

You have to feel for *Lost Odyssey*'s Kaim, the protagonist of Hironobu Sakaguchi's second RPG for Microsoft. He is an immortal that has so far lived for 1,000 years, and as you might expect has suffered a lot of turmoil, pain and disappointment. The weight of life hangs heavily on him, despite his youthful appearance, and as a result of his immortality he is unemotional, apathetic to death and destruction because – literally – he has seen the same stories over and over before. It's a clever conceit for a videogame: a protagonist who is ever-present in the world, yet unaffected emotionally by its events, and a story that can be told through chronological leaps, flashbacks, nightmares and even mundane objects that can trigger his memories.

Kaim isn't the only immortal in the game: there are at least four others with whom he'll cross paths, and as he remembers sections of his past (and they theirs) it becomes clear they are somehow linked. There has been a collective memory loss among the few immortals in this world after the millennium, and they join together to try and find out why, and as always happens in these situations become embroiled in the bigger conflict the world is currently engaged in. The major conflict is between republicans and royalists, in its own way a battle between past and present, but what has been seen thus far suggests that this is not used to its full potential, rather being a backdrop for a tale with definite good and evil sides (such as the sinister Gongara, an advisor of the good-hearted prince), which is a disappointment.

Like *Blue Dragon*, *Lost Odyssey* is a traditional RPG with extremely high production values, and to this end a lot of the game is based around moving through sumptuous locations and engaging in random battles. Up to five



There are some spectacular enemy encounters in *Lost Odyssey*, and the game rarely misses an opportunity to emphasise scale in the fluid attacking movements of its turn-based battles

Cry me a river

One of the more intriguing aspects of *Lost Odyssey*'s narrative is that the present-day arc is penned by Sakaguchi, but the various tales from Kaim's past, referred to as The Memory of One Thousand Years, are written by Kiyoshi Shigematsu, a highly acclaimed Japanese novelist. His themes tend to be families and friends, bullying and betrayal, and the impossibility of an objective perspective on the people close to you, and Sakaguchi has said "the reason I wanted Kiyoshi Shigematsu as part of this project is because we don't see enough emotion in videogames yet. Whether to do with family, or something else – something that brings tears to your eyes. The main element in these games is often fighting or whatever, but I want these emotional elements."

characters can take part in the latter, in any combination of a forward and back line (called the 'wall system', it affects how characters are protected by their position in the group; unsurprisingly, this seems to amount to little more than spellcasters and the like in the rear, big swords up front), although many more characters can be in your party. The trumpeted feature of the battles is the 'precision aiming system', but this essentially amounts to timed button presses for dealing critical damage. However, the battles never look less than engaging and selecting an option from your long list of magical possibilities, healing allies, and balancing them all out with standard attacks will be as compelling as any of Sakaguchi's work in the genre he has done so much to define.

Graphically, the game is extremely striking (it will, after all, ship on four dual-layer DVDs), with the expected sumptuous cutscenes of massively impressive structures and sequences. The characters' movement in the gameworld also responds to certain situations – when moving through heavy rain and wind, for example, Kaim holds his left forearm in front of his face and braces himself while trudging wearily forwards. In another scene, characters are running atop a train moving with an admirable sensation of speed, and backgrounds and general hubbub are as excellent as anything that has thus far been seen on 360. But though graphically attractive, the design of *Lost Odyssey* is equally careful. There is some wonderful imagination in its world, particularly noticeable in the battle devices – such as a mobile, rounded plate with four holes that fire hooks with ropes and then soldiers on to a battle fortress.

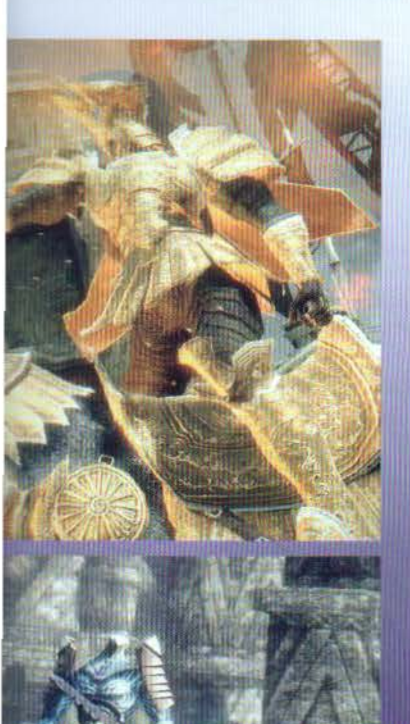
The dialogue veers between overwrought nonsense and highly realistic exchanges with surprising levels of personality – though, as ever, American voiceovers seem somewhat incongruous to the beautiful quasi-Asian setting. The storyline also provides odd moments, such as Seth (one of the immortals) coming across her son in the middle of a pitched battle – who happens to be old and grey-haired, while needless to say Seth is a foxy young woman.

With a development team including Takehiko Ounae (the manga artist behind Slam Dunk, among others), Sakaguchi, Kiyoshi Shigematsu (see 'Cry me a river') and Nobuo Uematsu, *Lost Odyssey* will be an RPG of lavish scope and production, and will certainly make Xbox 360 an even more credible position in the Japanese market going into Christmas. It has an interesting central concept, and what's being shown at the moment looks promising if not revolutionary. With such an assemblage of talent and resources, it's a shame that Microsoft and Mistwalker haven't been a little bolder with the game, and tried to set a few new standards, rather than just living up to the old ones. It will be enough, though, for RPG diehards.

The big set-pieces take place against rendered backdrops featuring many characters; the action then changes to a 'battle view' for your own encounters



The roleplaying man









During the game Kaim and the other hardy souls traverse their world and affect the overarching narrative involving the royal family and republicans, with Kaim's own unique perspective on history, and his memories of past events, informing his actions (and lack thereof) within the larger human picture

Hironobu Sakaguchi is the founder of Mistwalker studio, which is currently developing *Lost Odyssey* for Xbox 360. The creator of the *Final Fantasy* series, he has said in the past that he is driven by a desire to integrate narratives into videogames, and has been involved in many of the console RPG genre's highlights, from *Chrono Trigger* and *Xenogears* to *Vagrant Story*. *Lost Odyssey* is the second of two games Mistwalker has committed to developing for Microsoft, and we spoke to Sakaguchi about the game, and the past and future of the genre to which he has devoted his career.

***Lost Odyssey* has been in development for quite some time now...**

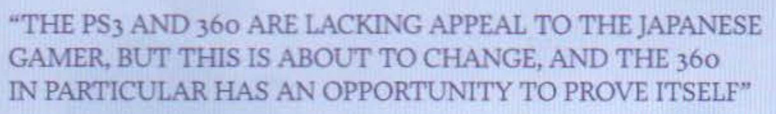
My objective with this title was graphical realism, so there was this huge need for realistic CG for the characters and backgrounds and also the special effects, and to achieve the level of detail we have in the game became a huge task. The high level of detail in the 3D models and textures would be quite useless if the animations don't match the quality, and you also have to think about things like facial expressions. You need to know where you want to go when working on these issues, what will be satisfactory, and delivering realistic and true faces in CG is very challenging. That's why it comes on four discs. I really am sorry about that, but we could not have fewer with the enormous amount of graphical data.

It looks as though the popularity of traditional RPGs is declining in Japan. What do you think of the current situation, and are you optimistic about the genre's future?

I believe that RPGs are still very popular among players, but I think the current market doesn't have favourable enough conditions for the genre to be booming. I'm particularly talking about the situation of gamer-oriented consoles. Consoles like the 360 and PS3 have still to make a breakthrough in terms of sales, and the market is very much about Nintendo. The PS3 and Xbox 360 are clearly lacking titles to appeal to the Japanese gamer, but this is about to change, and the Xbox 360 in particular has an opportunity to prove itself at the end of the year. Its line-up is the best Microsoft has ever had in Japan. My hope is that this will trigger again the need to play these games.

***Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* are conservative RPGs. Was this deliberate?**

Yes, that was my idea when designing the two titles, I wanted them to be a conservative experience and almost like tutorials in Japanese RPG culture. The systems are the ones I first created years ago when making *Final Fantasy* games. My objective is to focus on the drama and the story, not only on screen but through the experience of playing. One key reason for *Lost Odyssey* comes from the main plot. The story of a man who has lived for a thousand years is originally the work of a novel writer named Shigematsu. When it comes to the deeper elements of this story, you need to be able to deliver an emotional experience as well: so then you have a core gaming concept, but with the objective to make users feel and experience emotional content as well. So I needed to think about how far *Lost Odyssey* could be a game, and how much it had to tell a story. You can't imagine how challenging this is.



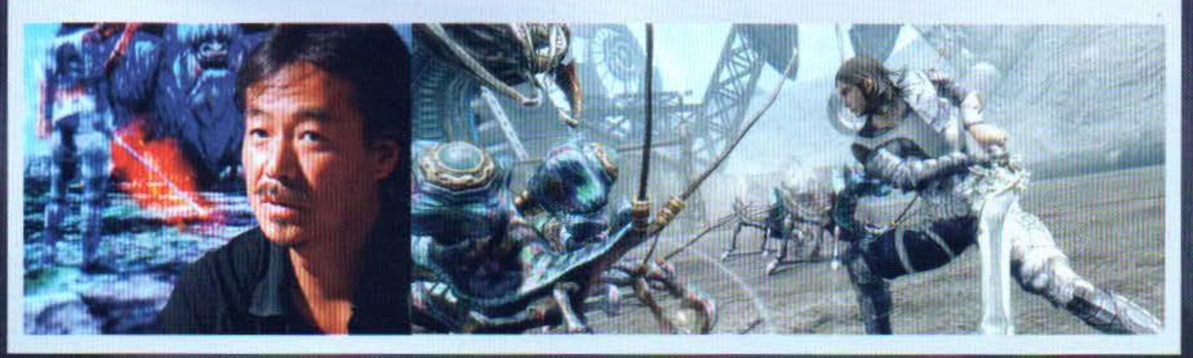
"THE PS3 AND 360 ARE LACKING APPEAL TO THE JAPANESE GAMER, BUT THIS IS ABOUT TO CHANGE, AND THE 360 IN PARTICULAR HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROVE ITSELF"

Were there any lessons from *Blue Dragon*'s development that you took into consideration with *Lost Odyssey*?

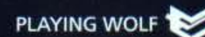
The two titles are developed by different teams, so there's no crossover. They're also quite distinct, as *Blue Dragon* is about a world which is in many ways Toriyama Akira's vision. Having said that, I think that there may be some relationships which we were not conscious of. The opening of *Blue Dragon* is white, and *Lost Odyssey*'s is black. There are just different concepts behind them: things like all those logos appearing at the beginning of *Blue Dragon* is something I feel wouldn't suit *Lost Odyssey*, it's a more intimate and mature world.

With the tenth anniversary of *FFVII*, various titles based around that game and its name are being released. Considering *FFVII* was one of your most personal creations, how do you feel about the way it's being used?

Indeed, lots of *Final Fantasy* games are being released nowadays. Well, I don't have a specific feeling about this. The way we used to make games was very much from a creative perspective; we invested all of our ideas into one single title. If new ideas occurred during the process of development, we would find a way to include them no matter what. So when the game was released, our minds were empty and dried out. Then we needed to begin thinking about our next challenge. In that sense, the title of *Final Fantasy* really means something: this was, and is still now, my way of creating games and challenging myself. I think it is a critical process that has to be kept very much alive. Videogames are both creations and products. Other people can create products. As a creator, I know this game has to be a product, but from my personal point of view it is a creation first and always: I don't see other ways to touch people, to trigger an emotional response from them.







PLAYING WOLF

Fairytales meet videogames in a dark retelling of The Little Red Riding Hood

TITLE: **THE PATH**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBC**
DEVELOPER: **TALE OF TALES**
ORIGIN: **BELGIUM**
RELEASE: **TBA**

A failure game. A game in which achieving its goal means it's game over. *The Path* probably isn't actually a game, but its creators, Belgium-based artists **Auriea Harvey** and **Michaël Samyn**, who as Tale Of Tales are also behind the MMO *The Endless Forest*, always refer to it as one.

The Path is probably closest to being an adventure game, themed around the dark story of Little Red Riding Hood and based in a free-to-explore 3D world. Players must travel through a dark forest to grandmother's house, encountering the wolf and other worrisome hindrances on the way. But while grandmother's house, which is found at the end of the titular path, is the goal, it's the journey that counts. After all, rushing through is to miss facing the horrors that lie in the forest and, therefore, the point of *The Path*.

"*The Path* is about growing up as a girl, which is what the fairy story is about," says Harvey. It will consist of six chapters composed of three acts, playable in any order. Each chapter is played through with a different Red Riding Hood sister,

The Path contains six different visions of Red Riding Hood, each with a different age and personality and journey ahead, including Goth, Kid, Sexpot and Virgin. They're designed to represent different aspects of growing up

each of whom represents a different aspect of growing up, and a different incarnation of the wolf. The first act is set in a modern apartment, the Red Riding Hood sisters' home, and played like a point and click adventure. The second, which constitutes the bulk of the chapter, is played through thirdperson perspective in the forest, and the third, set in grandmother's house, is in firstperson. "Each of those perspectives expresses your emotional position at that point of the game," says Harvey.

It's quickly obvious that *The Path* only uses the Red Riding Hood story as an archetype; a familiar setting that needs little exposition. From the moment players arrive in the forest they're free to roam, coming across clearings, which feature interactive elements and act as hangouts for the chapter's wolf character. "It isn't a goal of the game to create a linear narrative. It's more about getting a certain feeling across, an atmosphere," says Samyn. In effect, *The Path*'s story is told through interaction – it allows players, through their choices, to construct the narrative for themselves. "The process of playing becomes the process of not finding the story but creating one, with things that we offer in the world," Samyn continues. "Most things are very heavy with symbolism – there are sad girls and angry wolves and the scary forest – things that have meaning in themselves. But the way in which players combine them generates a story. Part of it is about coincidences, too – the world is a living universe and big part of the game is a freeform world that you can run around."

Harvey and Samyn compare the way its environments tell stories to their experience of living in the medieval city of Ghent, Belgium. "It's the perfect non-linear narrative environment," says Harvey. "You walk through it and there are all these stories all around you, and in general they're part of your culture – Christ on the cross, a weeping Mary, angels, doves – all these stories you're immersed in already. And a good game of the 3D immersive sort we're interested in gives you that feeling of inescapable narrative. Our favourite games have strong emotion, like *Silent Hill 2* or *Ico*, where you're really there and you never stop being curious about the things around you."

Indeed, Tale Of Tales believes videogames in general are more similar to architecture than cinema: "In architecture you're in the architecture, not just sitting and viewing it. It's about being rather than seeing, and that's why games are more closely related to architecture than film," says Samyn. Tale Of Tales has become known for making similar sweeping statements about the essential nature of videogames. Some, like this correction of the common comparison between videogames and cinema, are insightful. Others aren't so – a blog entry named 'Ten reasons why computer games are not games' has been roundly criticised for being

Harvey created most of the concept drawings, which encompass the three areas in which the game is set – a city apartment, grandmother's house and the forest – and is responsible for 3D assets and graphic design, while Samyn covers programming, sound and animation



Already, *The Path* looks graphically adept, with a distinctive art style. "We'll provide a unique experience, something that you can't get from any other developer because we are artists programming games. Basically, doing what we're not supposed to be doing – messing with technology," says Samyn

muddled. But whether right or wrong, what they have done is stimulate much constructive discussion about videogames' relationship with other cultural forms, and their need to be valued for providing the framework for a new artistic language.

To that end, Tale Of Tales is also insistent about the importance of realtime 3D – in fact, that it's the most creative new technology since oil on canvas. "The thing is, much like oil on canvas, realtime 3D allows people to say things they couldn't say before," says Samyn. "It adds the ability to say multiple things simultaneously and let the viewer decide the truth of that moment and location."

Fittingly, therefore, *The Path* is struck through with ambiguous characters and situations. For a start, players' relationship with the Red Riding Hood sisters is uncertain – are they playing her, or playing with her? It's hardly a unfamiliar idea – many other games, from *Metal Gear Solid* to *Paper Mario*, play on the relationship between player and player character. But *The Path*'s non-linearity means that it's the players that initiate the horrors they face, not the game structure, because from the very start it's possible to run straight to grandmother's house. But that would be boring. "In a way you have to make your avatar suffer to be able to win or make progress in the game," says Samyn. "To even have a game!" says Harvey. "It's not a horror survival game, but the opposite," adds Samyn. "It's a failure game – there's one goal and you must not do it! That's the premise of the whole game."

"IN A WAY YOU HAVE TO MAKE YOUR AVATAR SUFFER TO BE ABLE TO MAKE PROGRESS IN THE GAME. IT'S A FAILURE GAME – THERE'S ONE GOAL AND YOU MUST NOT DO IT!"

Beyond the ability to walk around and observe the world, what players will be able to do is so far unclear. The clearings, in which the player will encounter characters like the wolf and a mysterious girl in a white dress, as well as things like a scarecrow in a field of flowers, will solicit interaction of some form, but it's a feature that Tale Of Tales has recently had to entirely rethink. The first prototype for the game relied on a proprietary engine Tale Of Tales developed called Drama Princess, which governs NPC AI. At Drama Princess' core is a relationship system, which allowed them to create a minigame about getting on characters' good sides, as well as a dance game.

"It turned out to be a lot of fun. There were plenty of things to do all the time," says Harvey. "And that was the problem with it. *The Path*'s story is meant to be about the emotional struggle of a girl growing up, about the destruction that coincides with temptation, about the inevitability of death and so on. And we really want to go there, to explore these emotions." The result was that they found the game was distracting the player from its themes, because they were concentrating on the mechanics rather than the characters. And because players had lots to do, they felt they had control over the game. "*The Path* is not about having control and doing exactly what you want. It is about the conflicts between what you can do, want to do, should do, and are seduced to do," says Samyn.

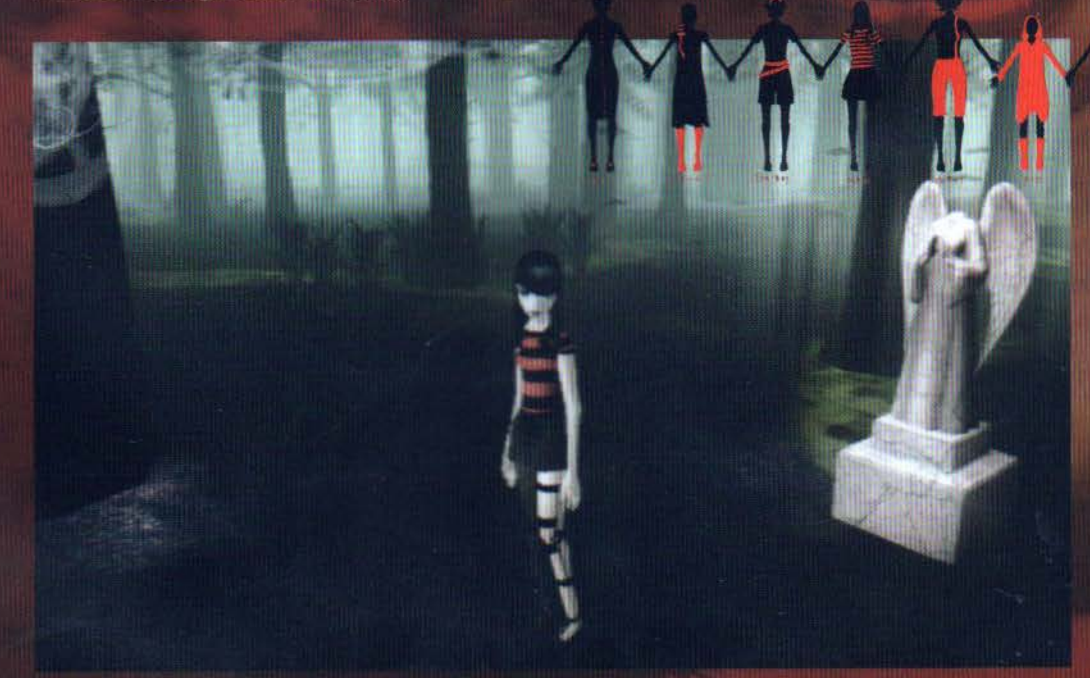
The developers have therefore taken the controversial decision to strip out a lot of the interactivity and let it be managed by the Drama Princess system, even down to some of the behaviour the player character exhibits. "You never know exactly what your avatar is going to do – we hope this creates a feeling of concern in the player that is appropriate for the game," says Samyn.

For most mainstream games, such a move might seem disastrous. But, then, is *The Path* actually a game? "Probably not!" says Samyn, cheerfully. "But it's going to be a game in that it uses games technology and requires game-like interaction. Most of the interaction you do in the games we're interested in working with isn't game-like anyway – it's walking around and looking at things. Only a very small percentage of time is doing rules-based things and getting rewards."

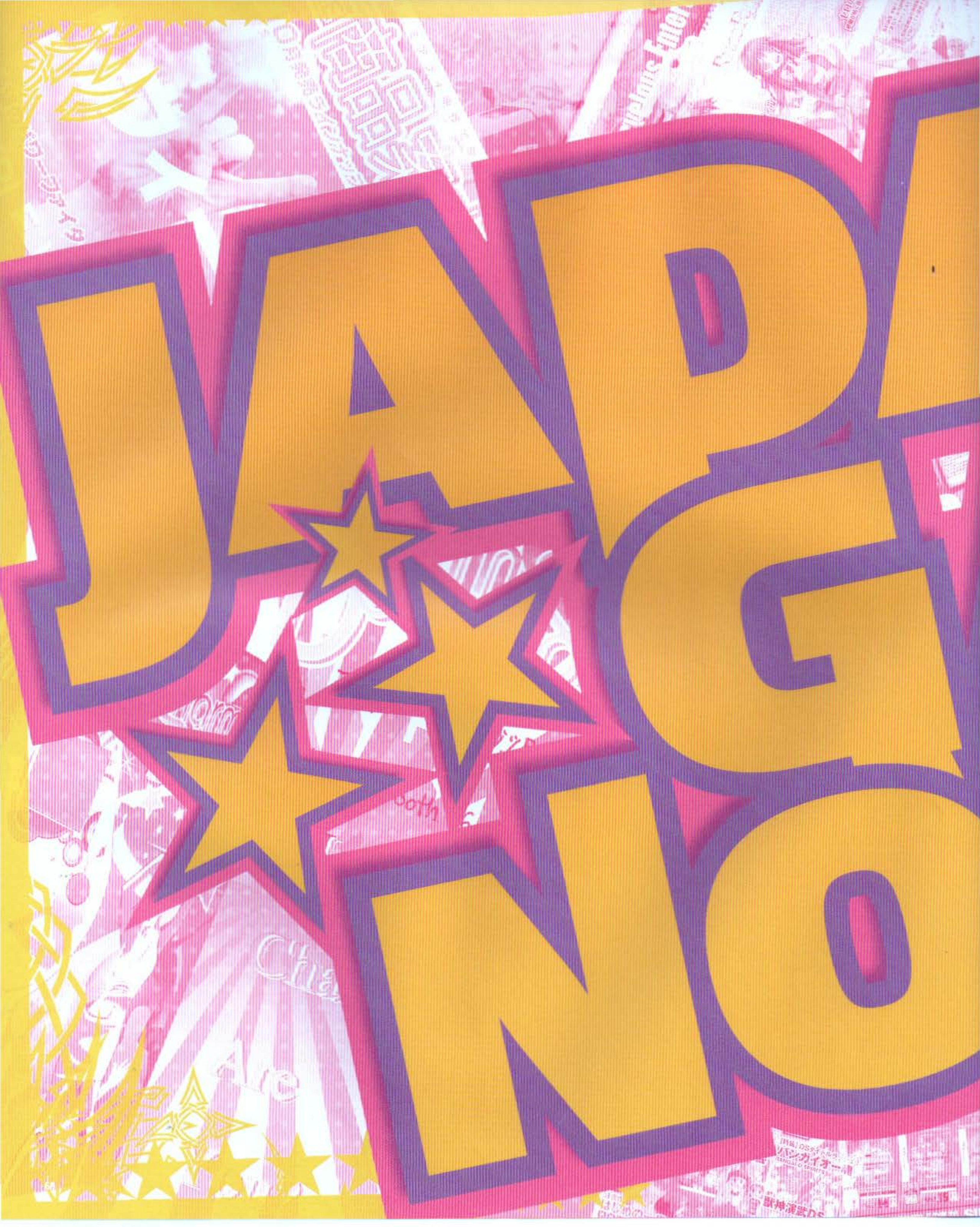
Even if its nature might diverge from being a videogame in the strictest sense, Tale Of Tales' grasp on what makes videogames distinct from other media makes *The Path* consequential. While so many videogame makers continue their obsession with aping cinematic ideals, Tale Of Tales is attempting to build on what makes videogames unique: interaction. And while so many other artists working with videogames merely produce scratchy mods or exploit glitches in NES games, Tale Of Tales is making original work with high production values. Ultimately, the success of *The Path* as a piece of art and a videogame will be two different issues. But whether it works in either cultural arena, Tale Of Tales' solution for allowing it to both express the themes and story it wants and afford players interactivity is likely to teach a lot about how mainstream videogames can tell stories.

Fairy sales

Harvey and Samyn are creating the bulk of *The Path* themselves, working from the studio in their home, with music, character animations and some 3D assets by external collaborators. It's funded through arts grants and a loan from a Belgian government cultural agency, but they're well aware of the financial risk they're taking. "The fact that we have chosen to make an experimental game with no way of proving its commercial viability does make us somewhat nervous," says Samyn. "Some indie games only sell a few hundred copies. If *The Path* turns out to be one of them, we'll probably go bankrupt. I guess this is the risk that every game developer takes at some point, except that most of them do it with a FPS, RPG or a MMO or what have you. But this technology has so much unexplored potential. Somebody needs to go there. And by all accounts, you only live once."



The Little Red Riding Hood story has often been used as a basis for exploring issues about female adolescence, including the film The Company of Wolves. Tale Of Tales is using universal recognition of such themes to build a world filled with subtle reference rather than overt exposition for players to explore


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ALWAYS LOOKING FORWARD, ALWAYS HAVING TO LIVE UP TO THE PAST. WHERE DO JAPANESE GAMES AND GAMERS STAND IN 2007?

When Satoru Iwata became president and CEO of Nintendo in 2002, few predicted that he would change the face of gaming. His ambition to take videogames beyond their traditional audience, in part a solution to a continually shrinking market, has permanently altered the Japanese gaming landscape. It has become almost de rigeur to talk about the Japanese gaming scene in the context of a vague rosy past, almost ambivalent to what the current Japanese influence is achieving in the industry as a whole. But it's perhaps the case that Japan's innovations are now so prevalent that they can only really be seen at a distance: rather than Japanese gaming meaning quirky titles with gaudy colour schemes and J-pop soundtracks, what about *Brain Training*, *Wii Fit*, or Talkman, the PlayStation Portable device that translates speech into one of a number of other



Two of Konami's new 'lifestyle' titles for the DS, part of a series of three. *Dream Skincare* is a cosmetics application, er, application, obviously intended for the hectic businesswoman, while the other two train players in yoga and pilates routines



At TGS, it was possible to take a look inside of Nintendo's handheld console. More exciting, perhaps, was *Resident Evil* overload in the form of credit cards (right), air guns, T-shirts saying you survived Raccoon City, and even Leon's plush jacket

languages? What about the concept of 'gaming' becoming synonymous with 'practical'?

The influence and success of the Japanese gaming industry is, in recent times, inseparable from the great comeback story of Nintendo. It's such a widely trumpeted story that some have become bored of it, pronouncing the DS and Wii hardware as too gimmicky and faddish, with too few 'hardcore' games and too much emphasis on sales rather than software. True, the stream of 'DS success!' and 'Wii sold out!' stories is repetitious, but there also exists a kind of churlishness surrounding the change in the industry brought about by these consoles, and what it means for the future of software.

Nintendo's DS has become the cornerstone of a new gaming market in Japan, and a social phenomenon. But why? Initially, at least, the interface opportunities of the touchscreen and microphone in combination with th classic D-pad and buttons was crucial. The shorthand term for these new gamers certainly holds a clue – the 'Touch Generation' was born, and with it new and surprising opportunities. Female players rapidly became larger proportion of the market (53 per cent, it's claimed and concerns quite apart from technical specs saw Nintendo thinking carefully about the aesthetics of the hardware itself. The redesign of the DS into the DS Lite was a direct response to this growing population of user making a small and desirable object less distinguishable a gaming device than its bulky silver predecessor. Walk into an electronics store's DS section, and not only will it have exploded in size over the past year, but there will b a wider demographic weighing up at the latest releases.

Quite apart from the market trends and demographics, it's also true that the DS interface allowe creatives to once again focus on the core concept of the videogame, returning to that rosy Japanese golden age the Famicom, when graphics were primitive and concep was everything. DS is commonly thought of as meaning 'Dual Screen', but Nintendo officially describes that as only a secondary meaning, the primary interpretation being 'Developer's System', because "we believe it give game creators brand new tools which will lead to more innovative games for the world's players."

Thus far, the Developer's System has certainly deliver on that promise of innovation, but in wildly tangential ways quite apart from the likes of *Brain Training*. Most obviously, the DS has become an icon of everyday life i Japan, with many non-videogame companies building non-videogame software for it. The Test of English for International Communication, a standard business communications qualification, can be studied via DS software. DS owners use their hardware to check aspec of their health. The DS browser is even used to access



To look at retail stores in Japan is to look at rack after rack of DS and Wii titles, from *Phantom Hourglass* and *Final Fantasy* to the latest *Face Training* and *Big Brain Academy* releases. Rumours suggest that Sony has paid to retain shelf space for the slow-selling PS3, but the stands for *Crisis Core* and the new PSP Slim testify to real sales

Photography: Hiroki Izumi

tests and deliver the results to students. 'Edutainment' is now central to the platform's software range, and includes purely educational and healthcare products. It is becoming more common to see DS software being sold in chemists and bookstores, and perhaps the final seal as an official tool of education came when Nintendo began taking orders from schools and universities.

Its ongoing success seems assured, but there might yet be trouble for the console's market, if not for Nintendo itself. A Nintendo statement at the end of 2006 put the attach rate for DS software at 3.9 games per console. While this looks healthy, it will be interesting to see if that level is maintained in future, particularly given the nature of the software that has been most notable for its success on the platform, since functional, single-purpose applications are very different from games that can be 'completed' and have a tendency to date. A DS owner may want *Brain Training 2* for its streamlining of features or new puzzles, but it's hardly a sequel or even an essential update. Game developers are divided over this huge potential market created by Nintendo: though obviously a major opportunity, it comes with big challenges and a possible danger for the industry.

First and most obviously, Nintendo has and always will produce the best-selling software on its platforms. Where almost every game that the company releases is a sales success, third parties by contrast need to release numerous titles in the hope that one will be successful and subsidise the remainder. The quantity of shovelware confirms that there is a buying public, but it also suggests that there is a perception among thirdparty publishers of a huge buying public, and whether or not the model proves sustainable will only be seen over time. Certainly, DS sales show no sign of slowing down just yet, with supplies still limited across Japan. And this in a territory in which it has been reported that one person out of seven in the territory already owns a DS (while titles released in 2004 are still present in weekly top 30 sales charts). That said, it's not entirely unrealistic to think that the DS, the key inspiration behind the worldwide boom in casual software sales, could also see its market saturated with low-quality titles and be the cause of some kind of market crash in the future.

DS SALES SHOW NO SIGN OF SLOWING DOWN, WITH SUPPLIES STILL LIMITED, IT HAS BEEN REPORTED THAT ONE PERSON IN SEVEN IN JAPAN OWNS A DS

The growth in new types of handheld console use does not represent the only big change to affect the Japanese gaming demographic, however. While most analysts see South Korea as the centre of online gaming in Asia, Japan has similar levels of broadband penetration in households (above 50 per cent), and in terms of cold hard numbers the financial projections for this year put South Korea's market as worth around a billion US dollars, and the Japanese as worth $800 million (£390 million). It has been posited that, by 2010, the Japanese market will be worth more than that of South Korea, while the biggest online titles – the likes of *Red*



A closer look at *Cosmetics Training*, which incorporates the new DS camera, offering a surprisingly good resolution. There are rumblings that Nintendo is currently testing prototypes of a comms application that will utilise wifi with the camera, although how it works with the DS hardware's basic microphone is unknown. Mobiles (top), meanwhile, have learned from Nintendo's innovations, here using camera input to 'feel' bowling swing



Another game 'inspired' by Nintendo, this is Sega *Dream Cats*. It's like 1992 all over again



GTA: San Andreas' heavy cultural references may actually have helped it to become one of the few western-developed titles to meet with large-scale Japanese success. *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* (above) didn't need such garnishing to become a smash

The amount of print media devoted to gaming can be bewildering at times, but it's a good indicator of what's on Japanese gamers' minds when the Tokyo Game Show comes around each year





A machine that could judge how charming you are (top left) would be a treat – this one didn't think much of us, and so was definitely a buggy prototype. But seeing something that you'd expect to come across in an old fairground (and with pen annotations on the flyer saying 'distributor wanted') did add a veneer of charm to the effortlessly slick and efficient TGS

Stone, *Final Fantasy XI* and *Ragnorak* – already have 200,000 to 275,000 Japanese subscribers.

Of course, there is more to the story, primarily the fact that Japanese gamers are not typically obsessed by high-end 3D graphics (2D erotic games remain a significant market) and mostly play PC games via laptops, or perhaps use their office computers to dabble with minigame websites during lunch. Interestingly, South Korea's Nexon Mobile is planning to launch its massively successful *MapleStory* MMO in Japan, its prerelease hype consisting of releasing four mobile games based around the *MapleStory* licence over mobile phones – a tactic that saw a significant buzz created around the game among schoolchildren.

Mobile phones have also introduced a new financial model: it's common to buy games online, typically via monthly subscriptions – a model that apes the success of iTunes. The Japanese mobile market has quadrupled in size over the last four years, from ¥20bn (£83.5m) to ¥75bn (£313m), and the decent specs of today's handsets, with their high-quality three-inch screens, mean that visually detailed games are becoming standard offerings. The market is bolstered by new instalments in established genres (such as *Final Fantasy Agito XIII*) and conversions of popular older titles (*Metal Gear Solid Mobile*), and it's certainly no coincidence that major thirdparty publishers are following each other, domino-like, in establishing standalone mobile divisions.

Not everything is successful by being new, portable, and flashy. The preowned games market in Japan exists on a different level to that of other territories and is the reason behind the plummeting prices of titles only a week or so after release. Significantly, almost all used games in Japan are in excellent condition and indistinguishable from new copies (with large discounts for any damage that may exist, however slight). This also accounts for the surprise that greets big second-week game sales, since the major share of a release's sales are typically achieved in the first week, before used copies flood the shelves. *Halo 3*, for example, had a massively successful first few weeks for Microsoft (in relative terms) by selling 60,000 copies – but that will likely represent a very high proportion of its overall sales to the installed base of around 400,000 Xbox 360 owners.

It's worth looking at the problems faced by Xbox 360 and PS3 in the context of consumer electronics in Japan, a fast-paced market driven by discounts. Technology evolves so rapidly that 32-inch HDTVs are routinely purchased as second sets. Children have flat 20-inch panels in their bedrooms, while 24-inch screens are common for PCs, while the older generation seeks to make statements about their welfare by purchasing enormous panels for their traditional countryside retreats. Mobile phone specs, meanwhile, exceed those of their western equivalents, they're cheap to purchase, and most now feature digital



The merchandise that accompanies popular franchises can range from the banal to the inspired – you can buy a full Dragon Ball Z outfit (top left), Tetsuya Nomura-designed figures for Square Enix's many titles (centre left), and refresh yourself afterwards with some of *Final Fantasy VII*'s health-giving canned potions. It's not exactly difficult to find something to tickle your fancy if you're a Gundam fan, either





Among the major publishers making huge strides on mobiles, Square Enix is one of the best. As well as the inevitable Chocobos and Mana, it has launched *Monotone* (top right), an attractive RPG designed specifically for the platform – and it shows. The little blond fellow's sword seems familiar, though. Other titles include a return for the 'big in Japan' fighter *Tobal*, which makes a good stab at controls for a mobile game

AWAY FROM THE CONSUMER MARKET, IT IS EVIDENT THAT JAPANESE PLAYERS ARE SPENDING MORE TIME IN ARCADES, WHICH ARE ENJOYING A RESURGENCE

TV tuners. The cost of new, full-HD digital video cameras is also falling rapidly. So Japanese consumers are used to buying high-performance electronic devices at very affordable prices. At the same time, however, DVD remains very much the standard movie format, and, when told of the need for a new generation of formats, whether HD-DVD or Blu-ray, consumers hardly hear the calls, even if those formats are presented alongside console platforms with aspirations as multimedia devices.

When consoles choose to play the high-performance game, they can't ignore these realities. By playing the toy card, Nintendo distanced itself from the technology race and made its Wii a simple proposition: it is for gaming entertainment, and priced as such. Clearly this frees up the consumer to acquire a Wii without having to weigh up a ticklist of multimedia features against a high price (and without having to consider where much bulkier consoles might fit into their AV setups). In addition, the impact of devices such as Apple's iPod in other areas cannot be ignored, with its new models eating into the market for gadgets such as the newly remodelled PSP.

So where does this leave those who make up the traditional Japanese gaming scene, those noble souls who do buy Xbox 360s and PS3s and the *Virtua Fighter* 5s and *Ridge Racers* to play on them? Well, there's an increasing uneasiness at ground level concerning the manner in which Japanese companies are looking to make games that appeal to the western rather than the Japanese market. Outsourcing here, too, is a part of development strategies as it has been before (it may have been unthinkable ten years ago for Nintendo to entrust the *Metroid* licence to a US developer). Yet the struggle of PlayStation 3 does most to illustrate the problem: right now, its software catalogue is dominated by western titles that have little appeal to Japanese gamers. Developers have long been waiting for a significant PS3 price cut to ignite the PS3 market, which in turn will allow them to press ahead with projects currently sitting on drawing boards. The tipping point may have been reached when Sony announced the introduction of a Japanese 40GB model at ¥39,980 (£170), which is precisely the pricepoint Japanese developers have been calling for. What's weird about the development, though, is that Sony neglected to make it public until after the recent Tokyo Game Show, thereby missing the opportunity for a big media splash.

Away from the consumer gaming market, it is evident that Japanese players are spending more time in arcades, which are enjoying something of a resurgence (as previously noted in **E**181). The most successful arcade game in recent times has been *Gundam Kizuna*, a team battle game played in a pod that recreates a mech's cockpit, which has made Namco's ORBS cabinet a smash hit. Top players are known to spend between ¥100,000

Out with the old...

A great number of Japanese homes still own the seemingly indestructible Super Famicom, and it's still used by the kids at home when they're not playing with DSes. That willingness to play with the old next to the latest technology can't be underestimated: the Super Famicom is a robust console with cheap games easily available secondhand, and simple 2D graphics as opposed to 3D flourishes. When Shigeru Miyamoto said, before the launch of the N64, that "I don't know if people want to play on the Ultra 64, in the same way that I don't know whether existing 16bit hardware isn't sufficient for the player anyway," it was less of a criticism of new hardware than an acknowledgement that, in Japan at least, specs will always be less important than what you do with them.





One of Sony's bigger stories at TGS was its DualShock 3 controller for PS3, although it wasn't quite the hit it was expecting. Meanwhile, 'Simple' continues to be applied to game ranges in order to give them marketing boosts, which can occasionally prove confusing for westerners, since the likes of *Puzzle Quest* are included





Well, it certainly certainly puts your local Gamestation in the shade (above). There is a huge range of options for gamers looking to give their DS the personal touch, while specialist controllers are hardly in short supply. Left: a particularly charismatic display at TGS

Used goods clampdown

In Tokyo, the secondhand paradise is Akihabara: but though still buzzing, it perhaps feels more empty than it did five years ago, with slightly fewer electronics shops and less wiry tangles and retro oddities in the ones still there, and simply less in the way of exotica. This may be a result of the seemingly endless attempts by the Japanese gaming industry to 'regulate' the sales of secondhand games. Although the Japanese trade ministry had relaxed its latest law as of April 2007, its low-level effects may remain for a time.

(£420) and ¥200,000 (£840) playing the game on a monthly basis, but and even less dedicated enthusiasts happily spend ¥50,000 (£210). Squadrons (essentially guilds) constantly form in four-on-four or eight-versus-eight configurations throughout *Kizuna*'s nationwide network, waiting their team's turn, drinking orange juice and eyeing the merchandise displayed in cabinets right next to them, pendants and T-shirts priced from ¥500 (£2) to ¥5,000 (£20). The arcade gaming environment in Japan is a particularly broad church, however. Middle-aged salarymen hunch over the ranks of *Idolmaster* machines, on which a young starlet (and, eventually, a group of starlets) must be guided from their first awful rehearsals to stadium-filling stardom. It's a process of talking to the girl, playing rhythm-action minigames to teach her how to sing, and even helping her to get dirt out of her eyes or providing a massage. It's not the sort of game you'd imagine immediately translating to other territories, but as a videogame it succeeds as a prime example of supremely addictive and rewarding mechanics – the genius touch, of course, being the 'Manager's Card' which records each of your sessions on the machine and allows you to continue your game anywhere across Japan via its network facility. Before, of course, sending your ido into online competition, and trouncing all-comers. Looking at the rows of brows wrinkled in concentration, the burned-down cigarettes forgotten in the ashtrays, and the sheer number of machines which dominate large sections of the card-game floors in big arcades, Japan's love affair with *The Idolmaster* is obvious. That the game is responsible for selling more DLC via Xbox Live – and, apparently, a rising attach rate for the service in Japan – than any other title is hardly surprising.

Its Manager's Card concept is indicative of the continuing popularity of IC Cards in Japanese arcades, th technology offering up a range of types, from being

YOU TALK TO THE GIRL, PLAY RHYTHM-ACTION MINIGAMES TO TEACH HER HOW TO SING, AND EVEN HELP HER TO GET DIRT OUT OF HER EYES

completely essential to a game to being nothing more than a record of statistics or a particular character modification. Since Sega's success with cards in *Virtua Fighter 4*, IC Cards have become ubiquitous for new games that hope to enjoy any sort of longevity. *Sangokushi Trisen* is an indicative example, a huge succes among IC Card games, but unremarkable looking. Based around battling medieval armies, the setup is a board alongside functional graphics depicting the results of the engagements. The level of depth on that simple playfield is obvious in the repeat custom (bolstered by the fact tha you receive a random card to add to your army of thick-ribbed warriors with every play) and the intense eyes locked on the rows of monitors which are raised beyond the board for onlookers. Following a period when companies such as Sega had been losing a great deal of money with their arcade interests, and the traditional sale of gaming cards in packs for around ¥500 (£2) apiece wa proving unsuccessful, the team that came up with idea o joining the game and the cards even more intimately has been able to celebrate a massive success. And this itself has offshoots: many of *Sangokushi Trisen*'s most dedicated players carry leather wallets featuring plastic pockets for their cards, some even with a strategy guide poking out of a satchel, both accessories easily bought alongside the *Gundam* merchandise.



Much to its credit, Microsoft's reputation among the Japanese gaming community is improving, although it won't be until the Xbox 360's successor (at least) that it can hope to achieve anything like good market share

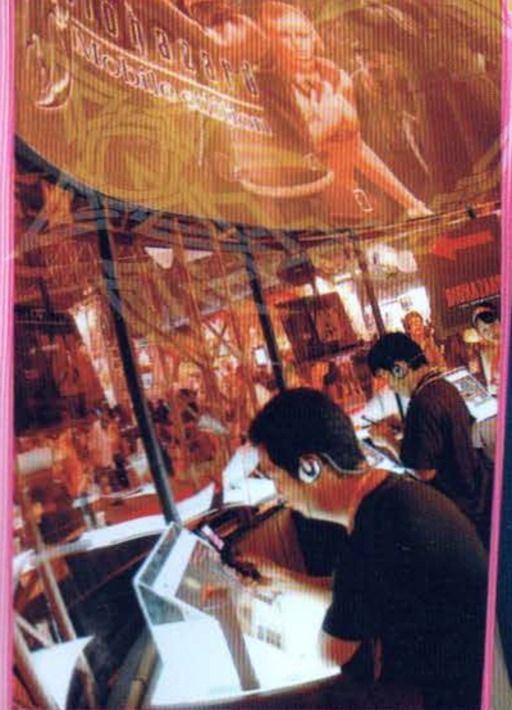
Stepping back from obsessive players, however, he real force behind the resurgence of Japan's arcades as been a redesign of venues which tailor each floor to a iven audience – in some of the biggest arcades there are ars for players to wait their turn, reading a book or atching live action on screens. Countrywide, and articularly outside of Tokyo, Sega has funded huge hanges to make its arcades social meeting places and ven dating spots. It's a return to the early days of ideogaming in Japan, when the arcade venue was a enuine meeting place and quite apart from the otaku ulture that has characterised it in recent years. Prize ames like UFO catchers sit in the entrance hall, games hat need to be played together (such as the recent quiz ame, *Answer X Answer*, designed to be played by a boy nd girl) stand in banks on the bright open floors, while ther 'hardcore' floors are given over to *Virtua Fighter* achines and card games. The wider world is interested n arcades as an extension of what it enjoys on DS; Sega ecognised this need and refashioned its venues to suit.

So the influence of the Touch Generation is felt again. t's noticeable in almost any area of Japanese gaming, ome more obviously than others. A look at the Japanese ame charts in any given week will show at least half of he top ten as DS titles, and Enterbrain (drawing data rom 35,000 retail stores) attributes an increase in evenue in the first quarter of 2007 almost entirely to the uccess of Nintendo's console: ¥277 billion (£1.17 billion), ompared to ¥207 billion (£880 million) in the same eriod in 2005. Recently, the relaunch of PSP as PSP Slim as been successful, thanks in no small part to the arrival f some high-quality original titles, primarily *Final Fantasy II: Crisis Core*, and *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops Plus* which sold a remarkable 93,000 copies in its first week of elease – not bad for a remix). And PSP's total sales in apan now stand at a little less than 6.5 million.

Until the DS's arrival, a combination of factors had een Japanese game sales decreasing slowly but steadily. nd speaking to Japanese gamers at the Tokyo Game how about prospects for 2008, both *MGS4* and *Final antasy XIII* seem to be awaited by a fanatical, but elatively small, group of fans, while the most anticipated ame by an enormous margin is *Dragon Quest IX*. In this ontext, it now seems like an obvious choice on Square nix's part to have made the game a DS exclusive.

Gaming in Japan has both obvious features and idden undercurrents. The ongoing success of Nintendo is ertain, both from a financial and creative perspective, ut the concerns over market saturation will not go away, nd no one knows what will happen to the entire Wii icture in the longer term. Sony is playing an unfamiliar ame of catch-up, and some publishers previously ommitted to the PlayStation brand are beginning to look t opportunities in the west, while others are licensing heir popular videogaming IPs to pachinko and pachislo machines (which, despite being an unsettled market, is still worth staggering amounts of money for manufacturers such as Sega Sammy). But the new markets that have been opened up in videogaming's recent past remain, drawn in by Nintendo's DS, while the industry's adaptation of games and arcades towards serving this new market have been successful.

The last western game to enjoy sustained and significant success in Japan was the PlayStation 2 iteration of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (which sold around 300,000 copies), but since that time many western companies have been trying to promote titles that stood little chance of succeeding. While there is admiration for the technical achievements and overseas sales of the likes of *Gears Of War* (a game that, along with *God Of War*, is frequently talked about by Japanese developers), it very rarely translates to market success and sales – they simply seem to leave the new Japanese game-buying market cold. Videogaming's cultural cachet is greater in Japan than elsewhere in the world, and it makes up a higher proportion of the entertainment industry than is the case in the west. Driving all that is a model that gives people what they want, in spades. It's one that would bring benefits to any territory.





Resident Evil 4 mobile (above) is surprisingly faithful to the original, right down to protecting Ashley, though obviously it still plays like a mobile game. *Virtua Fighter 5* (right) when combined with the Xbox 360 arcade stick, on the other hand, is as faithful as it gets





Simple ranges mean basic packaging and pricing (¥2,800 being about £11.70). Many of these games (left) are transfers of boardgame concepts to DS


DUALSHOCK3

Forwards compatible

ony thinks inside the box for its newest iteration of PS3. Can less really mean more?

Sony Computer Entertainment has a problem. It has sold 124 billion PlayStation 2 games into territories spanning the globe, but its newest PlayStation hardware will not play a single one of them.

How big is this problem? That depends who you ask. For many commentators on the internet, who've spent over a year now flicking criticism in Sony's direction, and indeed the many thousands of consumers who log on to websites to wallow in the negative spin, it's more proof that the company has lost the plot, and that its PS3 strategy is broken beyond repair. (This also just in, BTW: Hitler to front new PS3 ad campaign.) For the millions of people who use their PlayStation 2 consoles as karaoke machines, electronic quizmasters or simply something that will keep the kids quiet while they argue about whose turn it is to go to buy this week's lottery tickets? This sector of the market is surely hardly even aware that the newly introduced, sub-£300 PlayStation 3 won't play their old games. It's this sector, though, that Sony is looking to bring on board now that it is closer to offering PlayStation 3 as something like a massmarket proposition.

Sony expects the likes of Level 5's *White Knight Story* (main), Konami's *Pro Evo Soccer 2008* and its in-house-produced *Afrika* to make better use of the hardware than has been evident in too many rushed, clunky thirdparty releases to date







What are these people expected to do with their stacks of PS2 games? "If we'd have thought about this six months ago, at launch, when there were very few games in the marketplace, I think that would've been an issue, and in fact it was sufficient enough of an issue for us to invest the money in the software-based backwards compatibility," says Sony Computer Entertainment Europe managing director **Ray Maguire**. "I think now we have to make a very firm decision on which way we go: do we keep investing money in supporting backward compatibility so that people can play PlayStation 2 games without actually firing up their PS2? Or do we put the money into developing new games? I think the investment has to go in looking forward at new games, new experiences, new services, rather than looking backwards, at satisfying a technology that we superseded."

This is, of course, to gloss over comments previously made by senior SCE execs which made a much bigger deal out of the PlayStation family's relationionship with each other. Indeed, **Edge** columnist N'Gai Croal recently reminded readers of his blog that, in November last year, SCE chief **Kaz Hirai** said: "I think that when we ask the consumers to make an investment in software, it's our responsibility to make sure that the future consoles that we bring to market, including PS3, are able to actually play all these titles that the consumers have really spent a lot of money [on]... And I think you're doing the consumers and the gamers a huge disservice when you come out with a new console only to say it only plays PlayStation 3 games, and that's really counter-intuitive to our strategy, but also, really, to the Sony DNA." It seems, then, that facing up to the realities of chasing two competitors, not leading them, also means serving up a helping of customer disservice.

But, given that the technology driving the backwards compatibility in the previous Euro PS3 was, as Maguire says, software-based, how can Sony justify withdrawing this support? "The Cell chip keeps on moving," he begins. "Obviously, because that's a large cost in terms of the manufacturing of the PlayStation 3, as we keep on putting R&D and more advances in the Cell chip – to make it smaller, to make it lighter, to reduce the power consumption – some of the decisions that we have to make include: how do we allocate things within the Cell chip? And there is a big cost involved with doing the software emulation. So it's a cost issue, and – as we always do – we want to bring the price of the hardware down."

"We have to decide how we allocate things within the Cell chip. And there is a big cost involved with doing software emulation"

No one is offering hard details on the costs that would be involved were Sony to continue to offer backwards compatibility via a Cell-based solution. It is, however, confirmed that the company is still not making any profit from the PS3 hardware itself, so any and all savings are significant issues. At the same time, of course, it's also difficult to say how much money the company will make by continuing to sell profitable PS2 hardware throughout this Christmas and beyond.

Ultimately, all of the talk concerning backwards compatibility is deflecting attention away from the bigger issue: Sony has finally faced up to the biggest criticism levelled at its newest console, and done something about it. It previously had an opportunity to release a lower-cost iteration of the PS3 hardware, but chose another path, as Maguire recalls: "If we go back to the launch of PlayStation 3 in the UK, previously in the States we'd launched with a 60GB and a 20GB machine, and the 20GB machine had no wifi, no memory slots, and clearly it had the smaller hard disc – we chose not to go with that strategy in the UK. The UK is one of the most successful territories in the world in terms of people's propensity to [play videogames], and we felt right at the launch that what we wanted to do was give the real early adopters of technology the very best package, and just focus on that, so that's what we did – we went out with the 60GB console with all of the features included, and it was the biggest launch we've ever had. If you compare PlayStation 2 at £299 and PlayStation 3 at £425, we still had more people come into the PlayStation 3 offering simply because the value of the machine was still extraordinary."

Getting to that sub-£300 point, however, was clearly a fundamental, ultimate goal – it's just arrived sooner rather than later, thanks to much shoving. "I think sometimes in consumers' minds, if you've got PlayStation 1 at £299 and PlayStation 2 at £299, the logical thing to think is £299 for PlayStation 3," says Maguire, "but clearly in terms of technology and what you're getting from PlayStation 3 versus PlayStation 2, that was never going to happen at launch. Now we're obviously into the situation of getting further pricedowns, etc, and being able to produce a product which is at the same launch price as PlayStation 2. So I expect that for many people sub-£300 is the point that they would like to come



On October 9, SCEJ announced that it would introduce two new PS3 models into Japan, as of November 11: the 40GB Piano Black and Ceramic White (above) editions, at ¥39,980 (£170) apiece







Square Enix is maintaining firm support for PS3, lining up *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* (main) and *Final Fantasy XIII* (far left). On a smaller scale, a great many PSN titles are in the works, including the likes of *Go! Sports Ski*, from Yuke's

in to have access to all of the features that we offer consumers."

At the time of our interview, the new PS3 model is still some distance from hitting shop shelves, but Maguire is confident that slashing £125 from boxes carrying the PS3 badge will have an immediate effect. "Clearly there'll be a huge uptake," he states. "By the time you go to press we'll be at around about 500,000 PS3 sales in the UK, and through Christmas we'll take that well through the million mark."

It's not just cost that's been holding people back from buying PS3s, of course. There's its software catalogue, too. High-profile late-2007 hopes *Lair* and *Heavenly Sword* proved to be disappointments, while dual-format Xbox 360/PS3 releases have had a nasty habit of turning up on Microsoft's console first. It hasn't helped, either, that the delayed PS3 iterations have sometimes proved inferior. "Yes," concedes Maguire, "and it's an area that's starting to change. Because the 360 installed base was generated some time ago, in terms of development third parties were developing for that alone, then out comes the PlayStation 3 and the natural thing to do then is to use the existing IP – which is expensive to create – and bring it out on PlayStation 3. So basically it was 360-led development which was coming over to PlayStation 3. Over about the last six months what we're seeing is that in the creation of new games there's a different decision that has to be made. Because of the Cell chip, and because it's got a hard



Ray Maguire, managing director, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe

disc in every device, the way of generating games if you start with PlayStation 3 is you can create the optimal, ultimate game, and then you can knock out functionality to put it on to other platforms. And it's easier to do it that way than the other way, which is try and squeeze a little bit more out of [the game] to utilise the Cell chip and hard disc on PS3. But clearly it takes time, because these games are 18 months, two years in development. So we're in the period of crossover now, where people will start to develop on PlayStation 3 as the lead SKU if they're multiformat."

There's certainly no doubt that many games available on PS3 to date have suffered by originating elsewhere. In many cases, developers experience enough difficulty creating Xbox 360 titles that bear close scrutiny, let alone having to rethink their core makeup in order that they will run efficiently on Sony's differently engineered architecture (see Codeshop on p118 for more on the topic). "It's why, in many cases, you see that games like *Resistance* and *MotorStorm* were so much better than a lot of the products in the marketplace, because they were developed specifically for PlayStation 3, and the same will be true for *Drake's Fortune* and *Killzone 2* and *GT5*," says Maguire. "In *Ratchet & Clank* this Christmas you can just see the awesome clarity – it just brings the personality to life in our gaming experience. And for us that's the key to it: just to see another sequel, is not good enough."

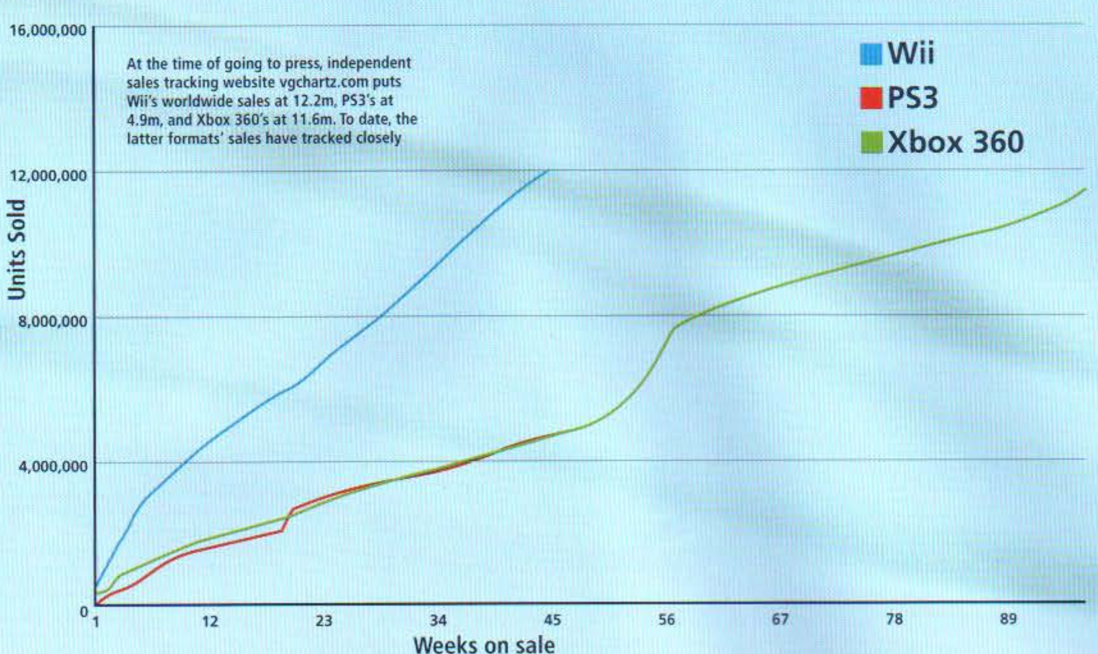
In the broader PS3 software context, then, how about other titles coming up in the near future? "Well, clearly there's really strong thirdparty support, so we're going to see a lot of product in the marketplace between now and Christmas – more choice for consumers than they would probably expect at this time in a console's lifecycle. From a firstparty perspective we've got a couple of great games in *Ratchet & Clank: Tools Of Destruction* [see p86] and *Drake's Fortune*. For me, I just love the whole idea of a new IP in *Drake's* – it's quite brave to do a new IP this early in a console's life, and obviously going into its first Christmas [in Europe], but it's looking like it's going to be a great game, and again starts to move the PlayStation 3 software into a new area. And looking at the plans for after Christmas as well we just keep on going forward on new IPs and new services and other areas that I think will make a point of difference between us and our competition."

It's difficult to say much more about new IP in the specific form of *LittleBigPlanet* than has already been said within these pages and elsewhere without sounding like a broken record, but it really does hold the capacity to change perceptions of console gaming. Meanwhile, in terms of services, Sony has delivered on Remote Play as it said it would (and hinted at what may be possible in the future by accidentally including support in *Lair* to allow the game to be played via the handheld), while its console has experienced successive firmware updates giving it additional functionality such as the ability to efficiently upscale DVDs, and its Play TV add-on will add dual-channel digital TV tuning and PVR functionality next year. PlayStation Home continues to evolve, although it recently suffered a knock when Sony announced that its launch would be pushed back from October to the spring of next year.

It all adds up to a complex, sophisticated and, clearly, difficult-to-manage picture. But not one part of it is *Halo 3*-shaped, while its online gaming service remains a simply lame prospect when



The new £299 Euro PS3 loses two USB slots, 20GB of hard drive capacity, its memory card reader, and backwards compatibility. Now at £349, the 60GB model is without question more attractive



Next stop: America

As the above graph illustrates, weekly PlayStation 3 hardware sales since launch have, to date, mostly followed the pattern laid out by Xbox 360 – and been completely left in the shade by the rate set by a certain console from Nintendo Company Ltd. The 40GB PS3's introduction into North America is the next step following Europe and Japan, and it's expected to reach the region at $399 (£196). As usual, though, analysts can't agree on what lies ahead for PS3 in the US. "November is typically double the other months, so expect around 450,000 units, and December is typically double November, so expect around 900,000 units," Wedbush Morgan's Michael Pachter opined to Edge's online partner, Next-Gen. Billy Pidgeon from IDC, meanwhile, said: "I don't expect major uptake on PS3 this holiday."

compared to Xbox Live, all of which goes some way to explaining why so many years-in-the-making hardcore gamers have found Sony's next-generation message so difficult to digest while Microsoft's has slid down the gullet (ridiculously mass-scale hardware failures notwithstanding, of course).

Sony has achieved much in its 13 years in the videogame hardware business, and consequently made a lot of videogame publishers a lot of money. Now that it's been squeezed by Microsoft, and is currently left some distance behind by Nintendo in both the handheld and under-the-TV market, how are its publishing partners responding? "They're demanding that we give them more people to sell to, because at the end of the day, [creating games] is a huge investment," says Maguire. "We've listened to that; that's why we're investing ourselves. So I would say that they know that we have a long lifespan in front of us with PlayStation 3; they know we invested huge amounts of money to make sure that we could have that long lifecycle by ensuring that we had the technology in there from day one that people could start to tap. It's basically releasing the power of the PlayStation 3, which is the journey that most developers are on right now. Everything's about experimentation now, and I think the next wave of this is to actually understand how gaming might change in terms of the experience. How people relate to media right now is changing on a monthly basis – with things like timeshifting on broadcast, people using their TVs in different ways – and there's such a moveable feast on just about every single front that we had to build in technology to make sure that we could go in whatever general direction that consumers wanted to go."

This is what made PS3 hardware so expensive in the first place, of course. To date, it's not a strategy that has proved successful as Sony had planned, but, as its management team has said on more than one occasion, this is a marathon, not a sprint: PS2 has been in the market since March 2000, and Sony is talking about getting ten years out of PS3 (although a successor is obviously expected to appear well before 2016). "From where we sit at Sony we have a vision of what we're trying to create, and where we're trying to go," explains Maguire. "We have a look at trends and try and forecast where consumers go, but we also have to be fleet of foot to make sure that we can adapt and twist if there are any changes in customer behaviour. I like to think that Ken Kutaragi was visionary, and what he specced in PlayStation 3 has enabled us to be able to do that. I think we're alone in that philosophy. I think there are other platforms out there which have a shorter lifecycle and will need more reinvestment and maybe new iterations, and I think that then destabilises, and I think what we've got is a platform which we can grow, and there's so much latent power that we've got the ability for people to be a bit more strategic in their planning and their route to market for some different and innovative types of gaming experience. And I think

"I think we're on different paths. And I think some of those paths are great right now for our competition, and I think some aren't so good. We'll all play out in our own space"

that's going to be what's most exciting. I don't care about my competition in as much as I think we're on different paths. And I think some of those paths are great right now for our competition, and I think some aren't so good, but nevertheless we will all play out in our own space."

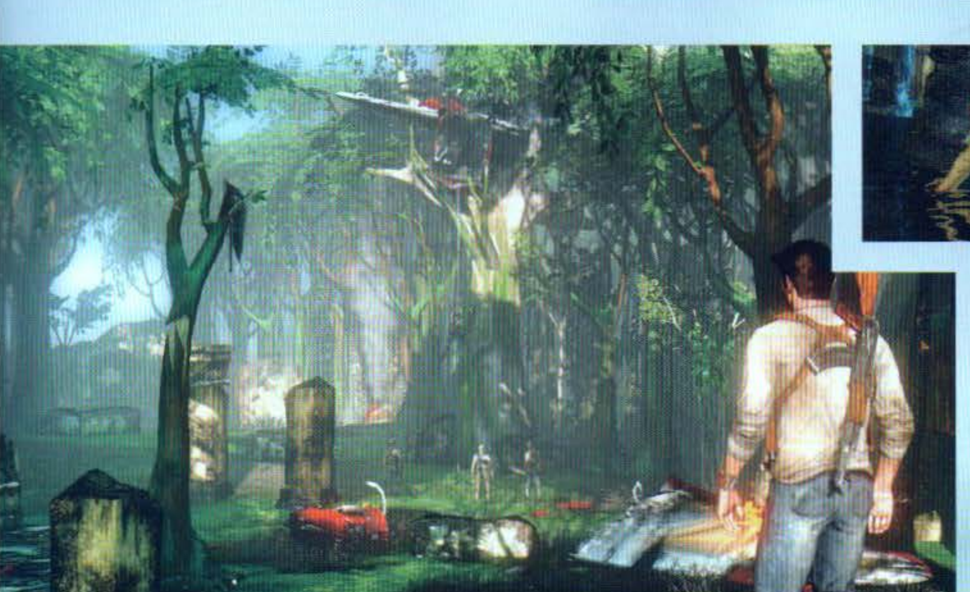
Despite the anti-Sony sentiments that continue to be gobbed across the internet on a daily basis, Maguire appears relaxed, yet, more importantly, realistic. "I think the company's doing quite well at the moment," he says. "We've got some big numbers to do. I don't think there's a single person in the building here [at SCEE HQ in London] that doesn't understand the task we've got ahead of us, but at the same time, we've got the tools, we've got the product, we've now got the right pricepoints, and I think it's just a question of going for it now. And that's what we'll do. And I'm convinced we'll get there."



Sony called it a last-gen feature, but consumers demanded it, so DualShock 3, due next year, will rumble

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

PUBLISHER: **SCEE** DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **DECEMBER**





***Drake's Fortune* is certainly one arresting-looking game, the lush jungles and hints of tribalism providing a vivid backdrop to the action**

One of PlayStation 3's great hopes before the end of the year comes from Sony stalwart Naughty Dog, responsible for both the *Crash Bandicoot* and *Jak & Daxter* series on previous consoles. And the half-affectionate murmurs of 'Bloke Raider' aren't too far off the chart in terms of how *Drake's Fortune* is shaping up: you control Nathan Drake, a descendant of Sir Francis Drake, who finds in his predecessor's coffin a clue as to the location of Eldorado's treasure, then heads off on a search to a faraway island. Predictably, it doesn't go smoothly.

The *Tomb Raider* comparisons are warranted: the game alternates between combat sections where Drake (and sometimes a companion) faces up to a flow of tooled-up mercenaries, and environmental puzzles that range from opening a door to finding your way up a big wall. The latter elements can seem something of a throwback, with the main examples shown thus far involving rotating statues and pulling levers to raise water levels, although they at least provide some sedentary and none-too-challenging moments away from the gunfighting (and one illustrates a neat movement between shifting items and checking Drake's journal, which seems to hold solutions that aren't obvious from the game setup). The only worry is that, like some locations on show, they may be badly signposted. Some areas look like they should be accessible but simply aren't, so you'll find yourself running up dead alleys and around the same space searching for an entrance you've missed that's hidden in a wall.

The combat is accomplished in certain respects, but can feel a little clumsy. It's from the cover-and-fire school of videogames, and alternates between tense standoffs with one or two enemies and large onslaughts from groups. Moving from cover to cover and ducking out to fire is relatively smooth (though will hopefully be tweaked in the remainder of development to remove scenery sticking points). The enemies have a tendency to dance from your bullets, and don't seem like the most intelligent of foes, but they're good shots and will quickly take you down in the open. Your partner, on the other hands, hangs back and takes potshots but can prove a little useless.

Graphically, *Drake's Fortune* is perhaps not so much a technical as an imaginative achievement. In terms of sheer grunt it has already been surpassed by *Heavenly Sword*, but it does have its own pleasingly ruined aesthetic, with vaulted stone constructions covered in creeping vines, foliage peeping out of brick walls, and moss-encrusted fountains. Drake himself is excellently realised, and the game is full of little



touches, such as his trousers getting wet in water. Less impressive is the animation, which isn't as fluid (or easy to control) as had previously been suggested: making leaps can be fiddly at times, and it's possible to feel little kinetic connection to the scenery.

Drake's Fortune is looking like it will turn out to be an extremely solid, if unspectacular, title. For that alone, many PS3 owners will be delighted at its imminent arrival, and it certainly fits well with users' tastes. But is it innovative enough? If nothing else, it needs a little tightening up of the fundamentals to be really accomplished, and worthy of those comparisons to Ms Croft.



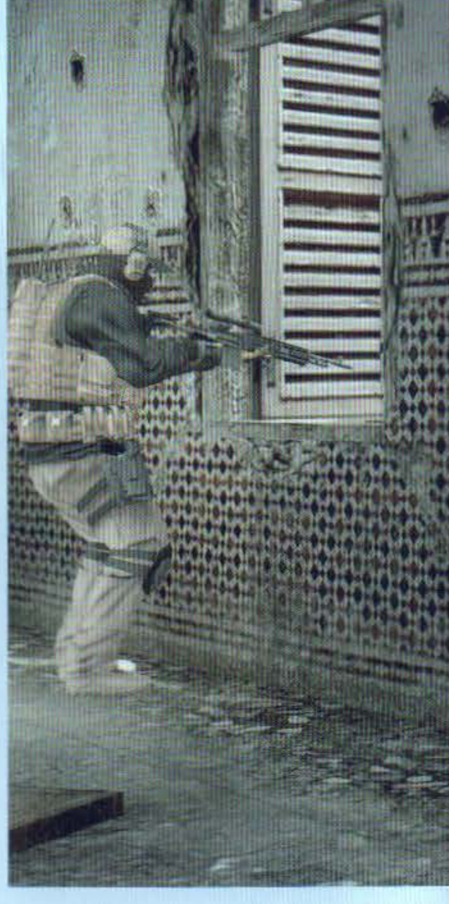


Yes, that is Sixaxis being used to balance while walking across a log. The context-sensitive close combat isn't so predictable, however

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots

PUBLISHER: **KONAMI** DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

Some tense moments rely on the Octocamo suit – though you'd think Metal Gears would have thermal imaging. What happens on the right, though, speaks for itself



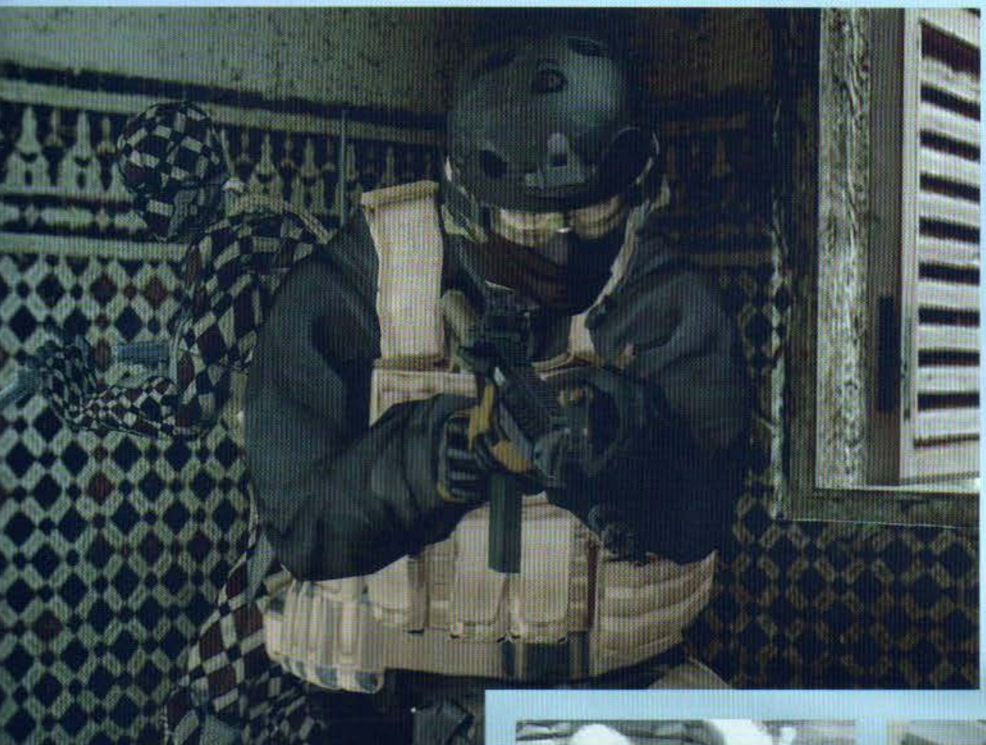
Metal Gear Solid 4 was playable for the first time at the TGS, featuring a short section from the level already shown in Hideo Kojima's July walkthrough. Quite apart from the massive hype that surround the title, it is first and foremost a *Metal Gear* game, with its roots in that lineage almost overbearing at times. It is exactly like its predecessors in some of the most important and varied respects – often fluid, often fiddly, sometimes astonishingly tense and sometimes tedious.

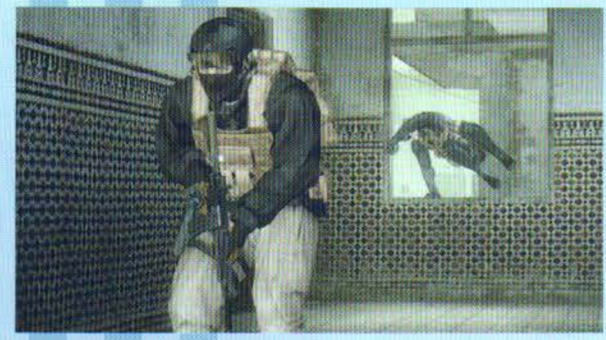
Graphically, it is a great-looking game, despite it being a good two years since first sight. The setting is superbly realised, from blown-out buildings and cars to the dust trails that kick up in the wake of bullets. It is hardly exceptional in the smallest details, however, and the likes of *Heavenly Sword* have more realistically rendered characters, but this may be due to the typically strong characterisation as much as the effects of ageing, and as with its predecessors *MGS4* will likely be overhauled significantly before release. A major disappointment, however, is that despite all of the flashy graphical effects, shadows are not important. In a stealth game, with the power of PS3 enemies should be able to notice such things and respond accordingly. In the TGS demo, they did not.

Movement proves responsive and slick, with Snake's ability to manoeuvre from any position a major new freedom. Sneaking up on enemies is muc[h] easier than it has been thanks to the combination of this and the camo suit, allowing you to move quickly and silently and take refuge almost anywhere in the scenery. It can feel unnatural at times, however, such as with the diving roll which ends with Snake standi[ng] upright and stopping his movement very briefly. Combat, on the other hand, is unquestionably improved, with a shoulder camera and reticule or auto-aim feature available, and a huge range of options for taking down enemy soldiers.

There was a little too much emphasis in the demo on moving through set checkpoints to trigger cutscenes, while the structures around you look as though they should be of some use but contain nothing but dead ends and empty, boxy rooms. The structure of *Metal Gear* games has always excelled a[t] giving opportunities for experimentation along a lin[ear] route, however, and it is likely the case here beyond what could be demonstrated in a short time. However, the bigger problem is that the enemy AI o[f] standard soldiers seems to have progressed little: th[eir] reactions upon discovering you are the same as they've always been – and it's disappointing to see them pile out of an armoured transport during an

There's no arguing with how Snake's aged, and the animation on his movements are brilliantly indicative of older bones – though he forward rolls like an 18-year-old















in-engine cutscene (which could easily have happened during play), beautifully animated and almost scarily realistic, and then once the game restarts reverting to the same tired patrol routes we've seen over and over again.

As regards the other half of *MGS4*, *Metal Gear Online*, a stand was set up at TGS with two teams of six facing off against the another in a relatively small map with a warehouse in the centre. It's often hard to tell what kind of tone Kojima Productions is attempting to strike with *Metal Gear* games, but tongue-in-cheek moments are most definitely absent from *MGO*: it is a straight-up, tactical team shooter.

There is a range of options to choose from before beginning – you can select up to four specialities for your soldier, from proficiency with an assault rifle to a talent for CQC. When the game begins there's a screen allowing you to choose your primary, secondary, and explosive/tactical weapons (such as grenades, smoke grenades and claymores). A quick team salute will reveal the location of your team, shown as blue or red wireframes through walls and obstacles, and a useful map shows their location and direction of interest, making it easy to direct group movement as well as follow formation.

Combat is like a more measured *Gears Of War*, based on tactical manoeuvring, cover firing and team movements – your characters have less destructive capacity and move slower than Fenix and co, but overall the pattern of cover/retreat/advance/roll/shoot all seems very familiar. That is no bad thing, of course, and *MGO* works admirably well when grouped teams meet each other in tense standoffs.

The weapons also have the usual limitations: the machine-gun has recoil that makes it impossible to fire accurately in anything but bursts, while the shotgun is powerful but requires frequent, and slow, reloading. The only uncomfortable feature is the close combat, which is a bit of a mess, but will be tightened up before release. *MGO* is enjoyable enough and a significant improvement over *MGS3*'s online play – the only problem is that it seems very much an online mode rather than a standalone game. Well made, certainly, but impossible to conceive of as anything other than a budget download for owners of *MGS4*.

Of course, both games doubtless have other tricks up their sleeves and this isn't the full *Metal Gear* story. But in terms of *MGS4*, what can be inferred from the TGS demos is that it is another progression for the series, but perhaps a somewhat more linear one than was hoped for. No change, then, when perhaps change is just what is needed.



Snake's inventory has thumping weapons and quirky oddities – although the L2/R2 method of selection carried over from the last generations is still slightly clunky

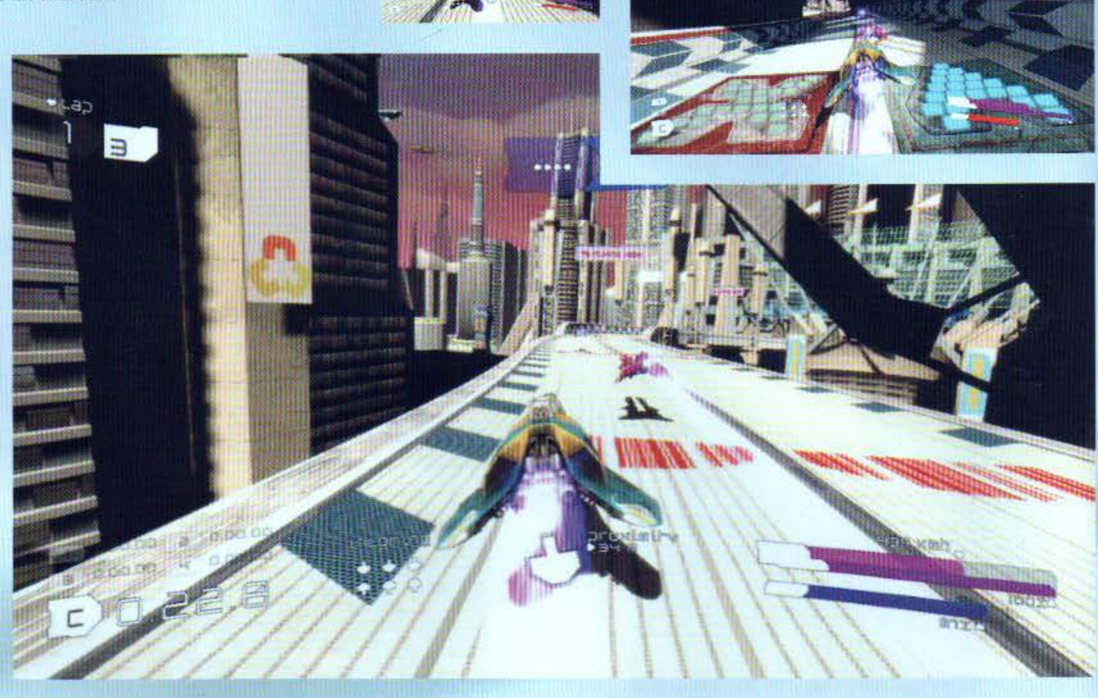
Bubbles and soda

As well as the hands-on *MGS4* opportunities at TGS, a new trailer was shown featuring the usual assortment of the exciting and the bizarre. The major talking point is a chimp, apparently called Little Grey, who is very fond of fizzy drinks and is shown as the pet of a weapons dealer, but is later seen holding Snake's hand. The voiceovers talk about the bigger conflict, and 'the line between civilian and soldier [getting] real blurry' as private military company interest increases.

Less intriguing but far more thrilling was a truck being driven hellishly fast through the streets and taking out a Metal Gear's leg, and the final shot of the trailer, which was of a face-off between Metal Gear Ray and Metal Gear Rex, seemingly piloted by Solid and Liquid Snake, with the genuinely excellent anthropomorphising of these metal monstrosities that has marked the trailers.

Wipeout HD

PUBLISHER: **SCEE** DEVELOPER: **SCE LIVERPOOL** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **TBC 2007**



W*ipeout HD* is… *Wipeout* in HD. It certainly looks exceptional, with bright colours and a real sensation of speed, and retains the precision difficulty of the original that has perhaps been muted down somewhat in the sequels. The game is not simply the original *Wipeout*, either, rather incorporating a selection of the better tracks from the series' rich history, along with certain innovations added in the later titles (such as the mag-strips from *Wipeout Pulse*). There will be a handful of new weapons and the ability to take screenshots in-game, but the biggest innovation in *Wipeout HD* is eightplayer online racing.

This is looking like an object lesson in how to update a classic, and should be the definitive version of the racer – at least until *Wipeout PS3* is ready sometime next year. Now, if only it's released at a *Tekken: Dark Resurrection* pricepoint…

Toy Home

PUBLISHER: **SCEE** DEVELOPER: **GAME REPUBLIC** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **TBC 2007**



T*oy Home* is a simplistic car game, based around racing through domestic locations, scattering objects everywhere and picking up items and driving through sweet spots to accumulate points. The cars are quite chunky, as are the objects that can be driven through, from salt shakers to cereal boxes (in the kitchen demo on show at TGS), and the settings have a very appealing design behind them, with some imaginative placing of ramps and obstacles like doughnuts. However, you'll frequently find yourself oversteering, understeering, driving into obstacles or past checkpoints and often straight off the end of the table, thanks entirely to the Sixaxis control. Unless *Toy Home* comes with an option to change to normal analogue controls it will join the growing list of promising PS3 games ruined by the incorporation of that much-maligned technology.

Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

PUBLISHER: **SCEE** DEVELOPER: **POLYPHONY DIGITAL** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **OCTOBER 26 (JAPAN), DECEMBER 12 (UK, US)**

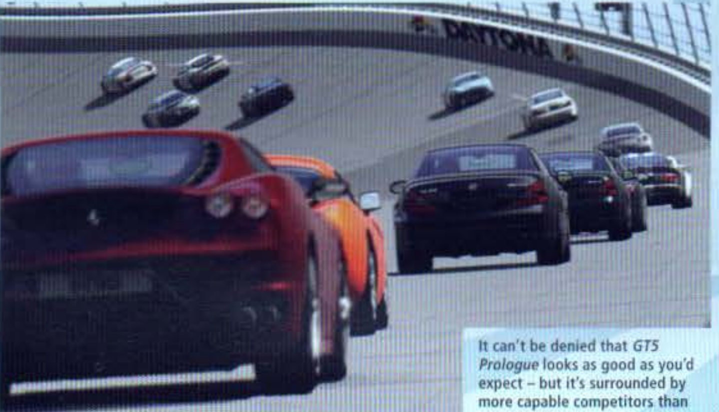


Gran Turismo 5 Prologue feels almost unbelievably realistic in-car, where your dashboard has a fully working speedometer and odometer, there are wing mirrors and a rear-view mirror that contain images more beautiful than most other full driving games, while the engine noise changes to reflect the interior. The only odd aspect, particularly compared to *PGR4*'s in-car view, is the absence of accurate gear-changing via your driver's hands. Weirdly, other sections of the game are at the moment graphically poor: the trackside crowds are boringly lifeless, mutely clapping and grinning on the same two-second loop regardless of your actions and the race. And, in thirdperson, even the amazing vehicles sometimes seem like shiny waxworks.

But *Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* can afford a few faults, being merely a taster for winter 2008's main course, and the most important aspect of this iteration is the onine support. This comes in the form of races for up to 16 players, and an incorporation of *Home* into the interface garage. The most surprising aspect of the release, however, is that there will be two different versions of the game: a downloadable version will be slightly cheaper, but it will be delivered without certain important features (such as, for the first time in *Gran Turismo*, damage on the vehicles, plus a weather system) that will be found on the Blu-ray disc. Nothing has been confirmed regarding the applications of this online, but it seems likely that those extra Blu-ray features will have to be reserved for offline play, which will unfortunately put *Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* some way behind its online competitors.



The insane levels of detail on the cars and in their handling is where the *Gran Turismo* series has set itself apart in the past, and *GT5 Prologue* is no exception. Every model is rendered with passion







It can't be denied that *GT5 Prologue* looks as good as you'd expect – but it's surrounded by more capable competitors than ever, that are already in the shops

Despite criticisms of the handling, which now has two selectable difficulty settings, by the likes of **Bruno Senna** (a professional Ferrari driver who has said that driving the Ferrari 599 in the game is "a bit too hard to be fun"), it follows along the same lines as the previous games. Frequent oversteer indicates more a rustiness in our *GT* skills than faults of the game, although following on from extensive sessions with *Project Gotham Racing 4* the Polyphony experience feels even more clinical than usual.





Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Halo 3



Social gaming is seeing everyone you know on Live playing the same thing, watching how they brought down the Scarab and sending them gloating pictures of your victories.
360, MICROSOFT

Geometry Wars: Waves



The same but different – and even more challenging and beautiful – *Waves* re-reinvents *GW* with only one single life to survive its volley of bright neon particle explosions.
360, MICROSOFT

Peggle



It's the sound effects that make it so irresistible. The chime as your ball strikes a peg, the dinks as they clear – and never before has Ode of Joy been used more appropriately.
PC, POPCAP

The deathmatch dilettante

Can we truly commit to multiple online games?



We may be in for one of the finest years of gaming in the last decade, but our capacity to enjoy so many online titles will be limited, especially when they're released right next to each other

When we visited Valve for **E**181's article we asked marketing director Doug Lombardi how he felt about releasing a game in the shadow of *Halo 3*. His response was that *Halo 3*'s success, rather than potentially eclipsing *The Orange Box*, was a benefit. If more people buy and love *Halo 3*, more people will buy games in general, his included.

In terms of singleplayer titles this is conceivably the case, as players may well discard a game once completed and be hungry for similar entertainment. But games that establish a competitive online community, as *The Orange Box* does with *Team Fortress 2*, demand a level of commitment from regular players that inevitably means other multiplayer titles lose out.

For Xbox owners, the multiplayer landscape was dominated for a long time by the *Halo* franchise, and the limited choice did at least mean you could guarantee which game all your friends would be playing. But in the time between *Halo*'s last and most recent instalments, this community has been split over many titles, including the likes of *Gears Of War*, *Call Of Duty 3* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas*. Even online games outside the shooter genre, such as *Forza*, have fragmented attention spans once focused on a narrower range of games.

As our Xbox Live friends lists are already indicating, *Halo 3*'s arrival heralds a return to that time when the choice of which online game to play was an easy one. It's in this context that *Team Fortress 2* must attempt to carve out a place for itself on Xbox 360 – and regardless of its excellence, it faces an uphill struggle. Even if you prefer its cheery mayhem to the precise deathmatch of *Halo 3*, it can be hard to ignore the game all of your friends are already playing.

Lucky for *Team Fortress 2* that it forms part of *The Orange Box*, a must-have package if ever one existed. The attractiveness of the bundle as a whole will put the title in the hands of people who might have otherwise simply deferred purchase, their multiplayer cravings already satisfied by *Halo 3*. Valve's strategy of adding value to excess shows just how competitive the field is likely to become – but while this is great news for gamers, it seems likely that many deserving but smaller titles may well simply disappear beneath the waters when it comes to online play.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



THE ORANGE BOX

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VALVE (PC), EA (360, PS3) DEVELOPER: VALVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E179, E181





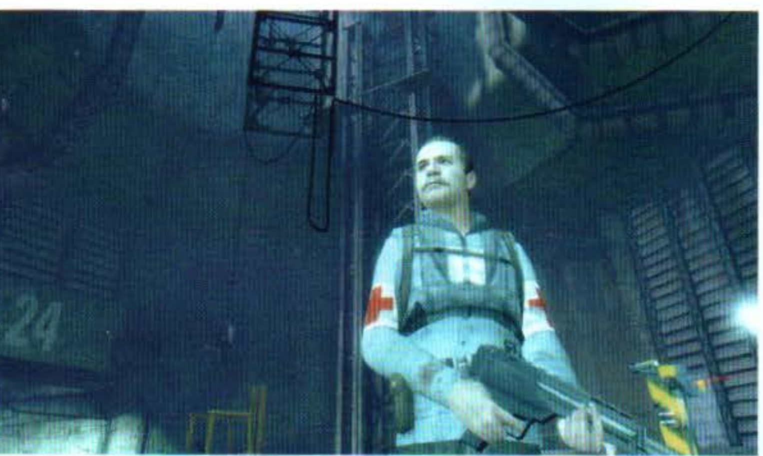
The latest episode brings new graphical tricks to the *Half-Life* series, including texture-shadowing effects most noticeable in the glistening antlion hives. The original *Half-Life 2* has been updated, too, getting a refurbishment which incorporates the HDR lighting previously used in its later instalments

You'd be forgiven for being suspicious if Valve was another, less eccentric company. After all, if any deal looked too good to be true it'd be this one: releasing three of the year's most anticipated titles together in one package, along with two prior, highly praised games. Justifiably praised games, in fact. *Half-Life 2*, itself an **Edge** 10, and *Episode 1* still tower above the offerings of more recent firstperson shooters. It might seem like ostentatious generosity, intended to distract from some flaw in its new offerings, but Valve just isn't that kind of company; *The Orange Box* really is that good. Its three primary parts – *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, *Team Fortress 2* and *Portal* – each wow in isolation, and beggar belief in combination, creating a product of unique diversity and unparalleled value.

Given both the brilliance and distinctiveness of each constituent game, it's difficult to assess their value in relation to one another and, though in this review we talk more about *Episode Two*, that's not because it's particularly the standout part of the package. Nonetheless, the greater



The threat feels genuine, that there's every possibility these characters will be snuffed out by the Combine's vengeance



One of Valve's core strengths is its use of incidental narrative: characters who play no more than bit parts in the overall drama are still realised with enough colour to suggest a bigger world outside your actions



These synthetic organisms, known as hunters, are the latest foe to roll off the Combine's production line. Attacking in packs, they'll attempt to encircle you, blasting you from afar with dart-like projectiles or running in to butt you

scrutiny is justified: *Episode Two* carries forward our existing investment in a series of true excellence. If the original *Half-Life* set new standards of involvement in the FPS genre, then its sequel easily furthered this achievement, seamlessly meshing compelling storytelling with the game's action, masking the underlying linearity through narrative drive and an art direction that evoked a larger world. *Episode Two* continues this tradition, and frequently betters its predecessors.

Once again a sense of urgency propels the player onward, the magnificence of the alpine range to which Gordon and Alyx escaped in the previous episode blinkering the player to the strictness of his path – but this time the compulsion to continue is a personal one. Although harried by pursuing Combine forces, escape is only one motivation – coming to the aid of your friends and allies is by far the more important concern. As the series has progressed, Valve has made an effort to establish personal, human connections within the drama of global strife, and *Episode One* ramped up the bond between the player and Alyx Vance, establishing sympathy with her fate. Although still possessed of a huge health bar, your ally, along with the rest of the resistance, here seems far more fragile. The threat against them feels genuine, that there's every possibility these characters will be snuffed out by the Combine's vengeance should you arrive too late.

To this cast are added new faces – Vortigaunt companions whose solemn flattery of the player is both amusing and unnerving, given how you have previously enjoyed stoving in their telepathic skulls with a crowbar. There are new enemies, too, and once again Valve proves that it has a knack for engineering brilliant AI-driven encounters. Acid-spitting antlions are the first of these formidable opponents – but keep their distance, attempting to bombard you at range, flitting between the slick tunnels of their hive in order to find new angles of attack. Then there are the hunters – tripedal Combine minions of a smaller scale than the striders, but faster, attacking you with impetuous vulpine aggression.

In some ways these new additions echo Valve's previous experiments – the antlions' acid attack recalls the bullsquid from the original game, and there is a clear unspoken connection between *Half-Life*'s houndeye and the doggy packs of hunters. Yet, in each case, the formula has been changed to create something new – a more delicately considered challenge. It's something that's true of much of *Episode Two*: sections of the previous games that resonated well with fans return in different guises, yet their frustrations are omitted, their ambitions scaled up. It offers much more diversity than









Episode Two's score always seems to kick in at just the right time, ramping up the adrenaline during the explosive action set-pieces. It's used to equally good effect during the game's quiet lulls, creating a sinister and melancholic atmosphere





Your Vortigaunt allies come in useful during your dealings with the antlions, and the sequence fleshes out some background, explaining the two species' connection

the modest descriptor of 'episode' suggests, switching fluidly between different styles of play and environments that, for all their distinctiveness, convince of their continuity.

Only at one point does the game struggle with its design, during a short section close to its conclusion which departs from the series' linear formula, placing the player in a wide-open environment, under attack from all sides. The game can't quite manage the scale of this encounter, even when a car is at your disposal to help you traverse the arena, but it's a momentary frustration in a six-hour experience of precise construction and great diversity, and it's followed by a narrative pay-off that mitigates its annoyances.

Besides the overarching plot, however, there are other writerly rewards. *Half-Life 2* excelled at delivering story obliquely, the environment describing incidental narratives that brought depth and integrity to the world. Here, in the mountain wilderness, the propaganda-spewing screens of City 17 are nowhere to be seen, and subsequently the politics of oppression and resistance that they described in previous instalments takes a backseat. However, as you travel through the broken, abused world there are many stories to be told. The journey to a resistance hideout is punctuated by diversions – weapons stashes, abandoned warehouses, obliterated homes – the story of their domination by Combine or some other calamity expressed eloquently through exploration.

Episode Two's sustained quality of action and rewarding fiction marks it as one of the finest exemplars of the genre. You'd think that *Episode Three* might have its work cut out for it, but the proposition set up by *Episode Two* is a thrilling one. Further questions arise just as certain threads are brought to an end, that familiar narrative drive constantly pushing the player onwards.

It's perhaps less surprising, then, that Valve, a company enamoured with the art of blending interactivity with narrative, has decided to frame *Portal* within a storyline teasingly connected with the *Half-Life* universe. In all other respects a pure puzzle game, *Portal*'s narrative trappings run the risk of feeling superfluous, but are ultimately a delight, such is the wit and black humour with which the challenges are presented. A captive at the mercy of ethically flexible weapons research company Aperture Science, you are subject to a series of trials testing both your intelligence and the capabilities of the Handheld Portal Device, the sleek, glossy white sibling to *Half-Life 2*'s Zero-Point Energy Manipulator. This portal gun can be fired at certain flat surfaces, be they walls, floors or ceilings, alternate triggers or mouse buttons placing portals of different colours, orange and blue, allowing you to step through one and out the other.

Continued

Xbox fresh

With Valve's heritage being largely PC-based, it's reasonable to be cautious about how well its games transfer to consoles, and the company has been somewhat blasé about this process. However, having given an even greater amount of playtime to the 360 version, we've found it to be just about as fluid in control and appearance as *The Orange Box*'s PC incarnation. One thing that will be missing from the 360 version, though, is the mod scene. Without the flow of material from the community, it will be interesting to see just exactly what Valve's plans are for free downloadable content on the console.



There's a titillating connection between *Half-Life*'s world and the story of *Portal*. It's going to be a painful wait to see what role Aperture Science has to play in Valve's future instalments













The 360 version adds the incentive of Achievements to the existing replay value; set up the portals as above an you earn recognition for falling a ridiculous distance

Dementia ex machina



Portal's sadistic, and frequently lethal, puzzles are described with bleakly witty euphemism. The AI responsible for incarcerating you refers to these gruelling test chambers as 'relaxation vaults'. It's an ongoing joke: 'I don't hate you', the sentry guns cheerfully intone as they gun you down. Besides these, and the ever-watchful AI, the labs are deserted – your closest thing to an ally is the 'companion cube' the AI supplies you with: a crate with a pink heart on its side. The success of this is clear: your journey through the test chambers is as much a desire to unravel this mystery as it is to challenge yourself with ever more convoluted puzzles.

Valve has eked out puzzles of great range and complexity from the simple principle of these two interlinked portals. It's the sign of great puzzle design: instead of simply pouring more and more variables into the mix, *Portal* teaches you new ways of exploiting the technology at your disposal.

ascent of escalating platforms. As you exit one portal and fly up from the momentum of your fall, you gain just enough altitude to drop the alternate portal on the next, higher platform, repeating until you either complete the puzzle or your brain withers, confounded by the constant change of orientation.



Portal strains your spatial perception, forcing you to consider tortuous trajectories that flip your orientation as you go from one portal to the next

You might use a portal to drop a crate on to a troublesome mounted auto-gun, or place them in order to quickly traverse a room from a timed lever to the door it opens – these being the more obvious solutions. As the game escalates, *Portal* strains your spatial perception, forcing you to consider tortuous trajectories that flip your orientation as you pass from one portal to the next; leap from a high platform into a portal far below and you can use the momentum bestowed upon you by gravity to propel yourself across an abyss.

One level, reputedly conceived by Gabe Newell, sees you use this tactic to propel yourself ever upwards in a stomach-churning

Although *Portal* is generally more meditative than the other games of *The Orange Box*, it conceals some considerable dynamism in its core concept, requiring both careful contemplation and rapid reaction. At a certain point the game abruptly ups the tempo, using your now-familiar suite of skills to churn through a sequence of deadlier environments towards the game's conclusion. It's this awareness and careful manipulation of pacing that unites the components of *The Orange Box*. *Episode Two* punctuates its highs of bloody, frenetic combat with quiet, melancholic lulls, and even *Team Fortress 2*, perhaps surprisingly for a multiplayer game

of such explosive action, also manages a variance of pace that sets it apart from mos other online titles. Partly this pacing is a matter of choice – the game offers nine distinct classes from which to select and, while the role of Scout is very different to that of the Heavy, for example, somehow Valve has made each class equally appealin

However, by the natural intermixing of these different roles, players inevitably creat situations that radically alter the flow of battle, creating constant, thrilling eddies. Tl Medic builds up 'ubercharge' as he heals ar then, when full, expends it by making himself and one other player invulnerable f







Gun turrets are vulnerable to Spy sabotage, and, inevitably, paranoia leads teammates to spray each other with bullets as they approach critical resources; an enemy Spy will take damage from this and be revealed









Team Fortress 2 keeps the objectives simple: only one level, a recreation of the classic '2fort', involves capture-the-flag gameplay. The remaining five maps are based around securing control points in sequence

a short period of time. It's enough to bolster an assault on a capture-point that can turn the tide of the game. Equally, as a Spy – who can disguise himself as an enemy – plunging his knife into a Medic's spine or sabotaging the Engineer's teleports, dispensers or turrets can prove key. As a result, these support positions become fortified by a paranoid bustle of Engineers, Medics and Pyros (the latter class' short-range but devastating blast of flame can turn an unsubtle Spy into charcoal in a matter of seconds). *Team Fortress 2*'s class system isn't so much built on the scissor-paper-stone model; instead, the game's exquisite balance relies on elegantly pitching situations and mixtures of classes against each other.

It's been in the making for the best part of a decade, but it's more than apparent where that effort has gone. *TF2* is a peerless team pursuit, astute in its mechanics and realised with unerring brilliance. The game's presentation epitomises ingenuity and polish, the cartoon art style succinctly conveying information that could otherwise be intimidating and abstract. Along with this come many comic touches – after death the screen automatically zooms to and freeze-frames your enemy, who may well be in the middle of one of the game's leering taunt animations. The Australian-voiced Sniper will wave jovially while saying, "Cheers for keeping your head still, you wanker!" while the Pyro will raise his flamethrower above his and emit a muted warble.

There is such care and attention in the detail of each and every part of *The Orange Box* – the cool, Alpine light dappling the ground in the forested wilderness of *Episode Two*; the rabid graffiti of previous Aperture Science test subjects; the cardboard cutouts of farm animals that conceal the sinister purposes of *Team Fortress*' arenas. Valve's genius is in the way it constructs its worlds through unspoken means – and *The Orange Box* is a perfect realisation of some staggering talent. At its lowest points it is highly competent. At its best, there is little that can touch it. The variety of its substance runs the gamut – furious action both online and off, tortuous puzzles, and enrapturing narrative. In each part it excels and betters what has gone before; as a whole it is almost overwhelming in its depth, irresistible in value and certainly, unreservedly, brilliant. **[10]**



Team Fortress 2 features gameplay that would be tricky to convey were it not for the cartoon aesthetic; the absurdity of the Soldier's rocket-jump, although an element common to titles ever since *Quake*, seems to be rather more fitting here

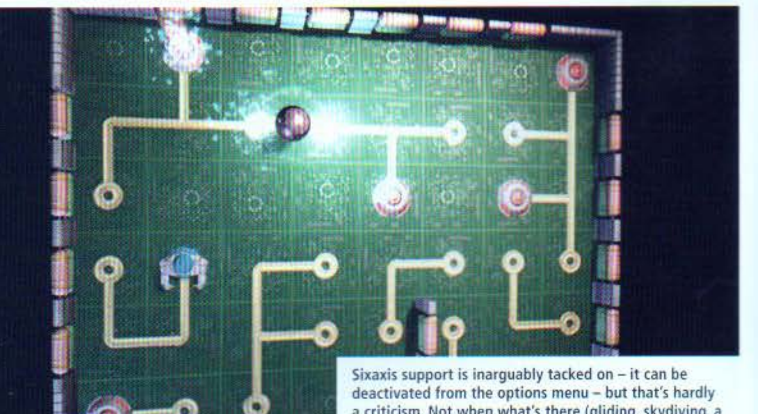


The Spy can become completely invisible for short periods of time and disguise himself as one of the players on the other team. When he does so, his own team see him as normal, save for a cardboard mask of the enemy's face



RATCHET & CLANK: TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 9 PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC PREVIOUSLY IN: E181



Sixaxis support is inarguably tacked on – it can be deactivated from the options menu – but that's hardly a criticism. Not when what's there (gliding, skydiving, a ball-rolling minigame, plus the movement of tornado and drone-copter weapons) is so smoothly calibrated





Think of *Tools Of Destruction* as a hi-def iteration of *Ratchet & Clank* and you're missing the point. You'd not be far off the mark, but the discrepancy is vital: this is *Ratchet & Clank does* HD, and not the other way around. To series fans and onlookers alike, its thirdperson shooter formula is an extremely familiar one. Traverse a series of planets, collecting gadgets and new weapons; blast myriad streams of enemies, and solve some slight but slick puzzles en route. Hey presto! The galaxy is once again saved from whichever threat – this time it's the genocidal Cragmite race, led by petulant attention-whore Lord Percival Tachyon, the arch-enemy of Ratchet's own Lombax race – that has descended upon it.

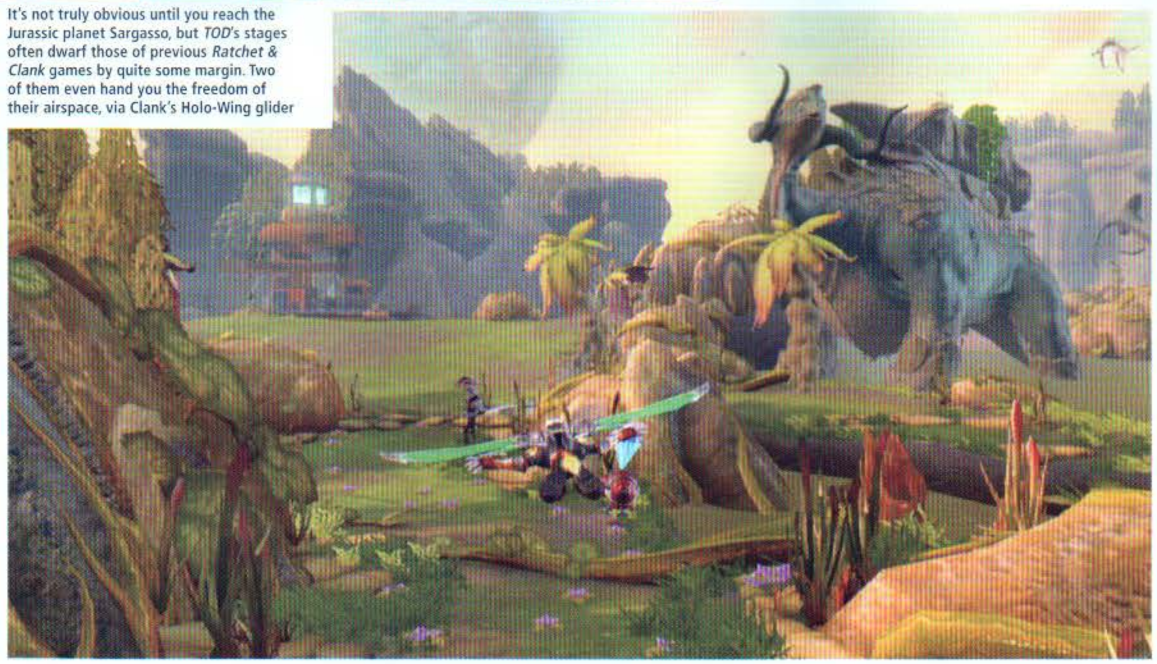
Innovative structure has never been the franchise's calling card, of course. *Ratchet & Clank* should perhaps be renamed *Guns & Environments*, after its true, imaginative stars. Sure, sufficient spit has been applied to the game's cutscenes and characters therein, enough to cement Insomniac's production credentials, but this is the *other* kind of Blu-ray disc. And neither *Tools Of Destruction*'s settings nor gunplay disappoint. Not that there's a single groundbreaking concept in among it all. Everything's just sleek, honed and excessive enough to be tremendous entertainment.



The absence of long-range weaponry may seem like a glaring omission, but there's rarely any call for it. The remote-control Visicopter allows Ratchet to scope ahead, while the Tornado Launcher (above) and Nanoswarmer turrets allow enemies behind cover to be taken down

> It's instant but very welcome gratification that ends with enemies exploding. A compulsion-driven pleasure that still hasn't lost its hook

None of its weapons demands the kind of strategising of, say, *Halo*, but you're just a quick-select menu away from your entire arsenal. There are the usual trigger-pumpers – streams of ricocheting sawblades, a shotgun that fires a spray of icy thorns – alongside the more novel-seeming ordnance, such as the Plasma Beasts, corrosive monsters that leap and splatter at enemies. There are hand-tossed grenades that whistle and fizzle like fireworks. There's even a flamethrower



It's not truly obvious until you reach the Jurassic planet Sargasso, but *TOD*'s stages often dwarf those of previous *Ratchet & Clank* games by quite some margin. Two of them even hand you the freedom of their airspace, via Clank's Holo-Wing glider



Gun battles can get so intense that you're sometimes left clueless as to which bullets are incoming and which are outgoing. Keeping moving will see you through, however




The game feels most similar to *Ratchet & Clank 2*, but the team deathmatch scraps of the third game also make an appearance, thanks to Cronk and Zephyr. This pair of veteran bots provides backup for some lengthy standoffs


Not to be outdone by *Size Matters*, *TOD*'s on-rails space battles are glorious. Through black holes, solar flares, moon bases and asteroids – next to *Mario Galaxy* and *Halo 3*, PS3 has its own heavenly bodies to be proud of

that's actually ferocious and convincing, and not just a guffer of greasy yellow clouds. They're all linked by their unquestioning ease of use, turning the action into a slick fire-and-forget festival; it's instant but very welcome gratification that ends with enemies exploding into signature spills of collectible nuts and bolts, a vacuous, compulsion-driven pleasure that still hasn't lost its hook.

The game itself will eventually force you to tap and appreciate everything in Ratchet's backpack – the later stages feature some widely spaced checkpoints, and defeat that comes on the back of too few hits. But any savagery is buffered by those pesky yet agreeable RPG elements – something, whether Ratchet's energy bar or the guns he totes, is always levelling up (see 'Second wind') – and the fact that your ammo stores are wilfully replenished upon restarts. Such user-friendly streamlining suits *Tools Of Destruction* well, partially because it would otherwise turn into a slog, but mostly because your main role is to kick off as much onscreen chaos as possible, while basking the resulting fallout.

Through its uninhibited use of blaring colour and garish geometry, *Tools Of Destruction* continues the series legacy of providing some of gaming's prettiest visual mathematics around, where the heated sci-fi technology on display *is* its art style. However, of its environments, *Tools Of Destruction*'s most monochrome locations are its most striking. Planet Rykan and the Kreeli Comet – technically a fire world and ice world, respectively, of all things – are its most handsome, showcasing the layers of abundant detail that have been lavished on most of the worlds. Much of it is nothing





more than backdrop, but this is a game where such glory counts, adding a further sense of solidity to the carbonated combat.

Clank's puzzle sections have been sexed up, but remain stubbornly straightforward. This time he's accompanied by the mystical Zoni (spot the pun?) bots that allow him to slow time, levitate and rebuild shattered objects. Clank's finest moment is a vivid trip through the guts of a supercomputer, but the range of commands available feel once again underplayed. Ditto Ratchet's Gyro-Cycle – Super Lombax Ball, essentially – a pleasant toy to roll around, but which is put to too little use. The absence of multiplayer

Arena-based challenges return on Planet Mukow, including boss battles (such as your scrap with Crushto, above) and time-based shootouts, in return for fat bolt bonuses and perhaps even the occasional gadget

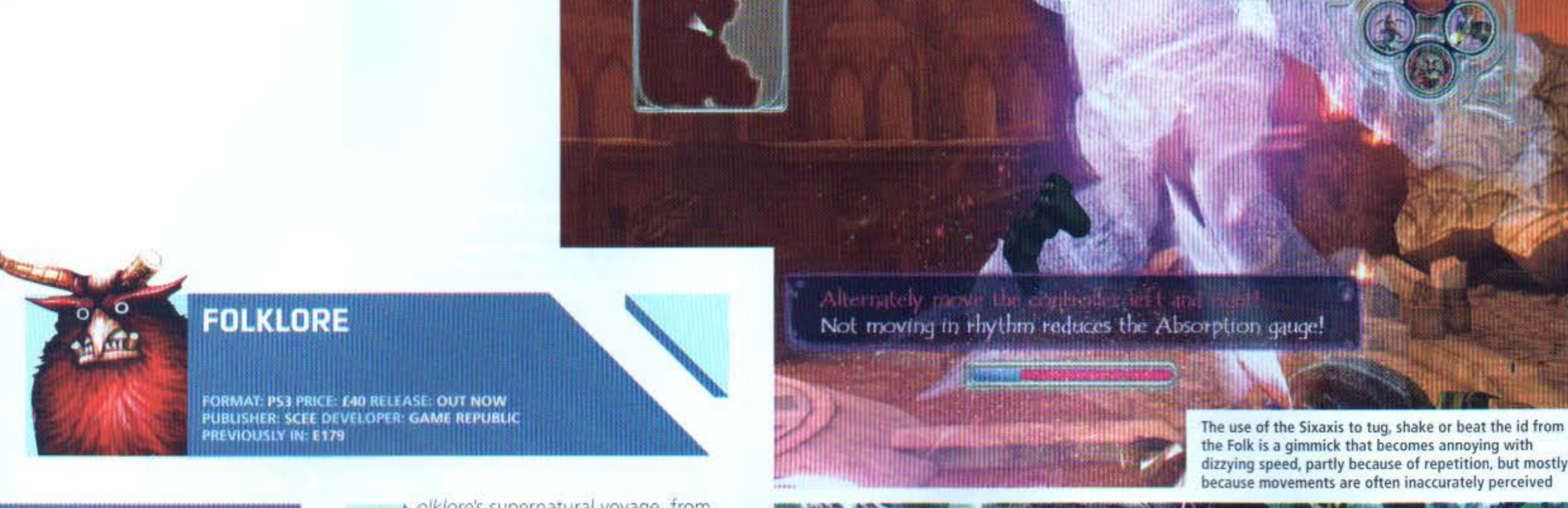
smacks of a need to release in the Christmas run-up, and would've rounded off the PS3's most confident and cogent piece of mainstream software to date.

For all the gnashing over Sony's PS3 promotion throughout the past year, it's vital to remember that the PlayStation firstparty software bloodline is an immense one. That *Tools Of Destruction* has arguably met such an expectation is flattery indeed. After the somewhat wobbly *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, that Insomniac has so confidently found its feet makes the prospect of Ratchet's annual return an exciting, rather than obligatory, one. **[8]**

Second wind



As seasoned fans would expect, completing *Tools Of Destruction* unlocks Challenge Mode, a chance to replay the game with inherited inventory and weapon or health upgrades, but minus gadgets. Enemies are tougher, further gun upgrades become available and a jackpot of bolts is available for killing without taking damage. The oft-overlooked but much appreciated firstperson mode, however, isn't unlocked, but Challenge Mode still remains a prime example of how to (re)play on a game's strengths. Anyone who relishes their first playthrough will doubtless enjoy this retreading, given how it extends the key thrill of burgeoning firepower.



The use of the Sixaxis to tug, shake or beat the id from the Folk is a gimmick that becomes annoying with dizzying speed, partly because of repetition, but mostly because movements are often inaccurately perceived

FOLKLORE

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: GAME REPUBLIC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E179

Myth'd opportunity



Behind *Folklore*'s somewhat inchoate storytelling lie some profound ideas. Although the Faeries are a cheerful bunch, and keen to help you, it's difficult to shake the suspicion that they are manipulating you for their own ends. There's a battle raging in the Netherworld; the Faeries wish to restore it to a paradise known and understood by man, while the mysterious figure of Livane wants to prevent contact between the worlds as it is only through fear of death that humankind are inspired to make the best of their lives. Unfortunately, you are given very little freedom to properly explore these alliances.

Folklore's supernatural voyage, from the rugged splendour of an Irish islet to the varied and vivid madness of the netherworld, establishes it as one of the year's most visually imaginative titles. With Yoshiki Okamoto, the esteemed producer behind *Devil May Cry* and *Resident Evil*, on board, the game is clearly one of PS3's prospective heavy hitters. However, as with Sony's other long-awaited exclusives, *Lair* and *Heavenly Sword*, *Folklore* pulls its punches, and the romance of its vision ultimately all but vanishes in a puff of fairy dust.

Folklore offers you the role of two protagonists, between which you can swap, each following a nominally different storyline. Keats, a cynical reporter for an occult magazine, finds himself in the village of Doolin after receiving a strange phone call. Here he encounters Ellen, a disturbed young girl in search of her long-lost mother. Together they uncover murder and intrigue in the village, passing between the land of the living and the land of the dead to investigate the mysteries surrounding them.

The action of the game doesn't live up to this conceit, your time divided between enduring turgid exposition in the village and button-mashing dungeon crawls in the netherworld. While the island allows an amount of free-roaming, never is there more than one goal available to you at a time, making it crushingly linear. Its problem recalls *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*, which stymied its own potential by constricting your objectives; *Folklore*, although conjuring up a compelling atmosphere, often makes it feel that your role as a player is simply to move between cutscenes. There's no thinking ahead permitted: if you solve a puzzle before the characters, you have to wait for them to thrash it out at length before the objective becomes available to you. They do so via comic-strip style dialogues which, unlike *Hotel Dusk*'s, do not have the redeeming feature of being particularly well written.

The ability to switch between the two characters is mishandled. Often you'll have to sit through the same cutscenes and you fight the same bosses even if you have already killed them with the other character

Oddly, the lands of the dead prove to offer the more lively action. The netherworld realms are each based on a different conception of the afterlife, and filled with vicious creatures known as Folks. The variety and ingenuity of their design is one of the game's greatest positives – and the idea that forms the basis of combat is inventive: having defeated a Folk, you can absorb its 'id' and use its attack moves. Different Folks are more susceptible to attacks from particular ids, and these grow in power as you collect more ids.

For the most part, however, combat often amounts to circle-strafing and hammering a button. And for many Folk you'll be hammering for some time – well beyond the point at which you've surely proved yourself a competent hammerer. Late in the game, the combat offers tactical nuance but nonetheless continues to misconstrue repetition for difficulty.

Folklore's lurid, hallucinatory visuals can't quite gloss over the unfulfilled potential here. The game's intermittently interesting combat isn't enough to carry the storyline or its sluggish, stuttering expository devices. **[5]**



Perhaps even before its stunning visual design, *Folklore*'s mood is often flawlessly realised by the score. The theme playing while you explore the island is particularly powerful, recalling film noir





THE EYE OF JUDGMENT

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £60 RELEASE: OCTOBER 26
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E179

If videogames once owed a debt to their tabletop ancestors, it's now clear that the potential of digital entertainment has since expanded, not least because it does away with physical materials and their associated limitations. Recent conversions to the digital medium, such as the boardgames Settlers Of Catan and Carcassonne, have benefited from the quick set-up and score calculation, while losing none of their original complexity. *The Eye Of Judgment*, an odd hybrid between a strategic card game and videogame, is in comparison the poorest compromise – involving both a cumbersome physical set-up and a superfluous digital frontend that does little to increase the fluidity of gameplay.

Boxed alongside a PlayStation Eye and a starter pack of 30 cards, the game that *The Eye Of Judgment* conceals is not wholly without interesting challenge, despite the young age group at which it is so clearly pitched. A diluted mixture of Top Trumps and chess set to a thrashing rock soundtrack, players lay cards in turn, aiming to occupy five spaces on a three-by-three grid. As the cards are placed, the Eye hardware reads their barcode-style markings and visualises the creature or spell indicated on screen. Cards will automatically 'attack' other cards, at which point the screen cuts from depicting the board's layout to a short battle sequence.

There is little purpose behind this virtual illustration: the results are not difficult to calculate – a matter of subtracting attack points from hit points – and the animations themselves are limp and fail to insinuate connection between combatants. Yet this appears to be the sole selling point; in other ways the virtual interface does little to help players and, if anything, slows the game down as you wait for it to catch up with things that are already evident to players – such as victory, failure and boredom.

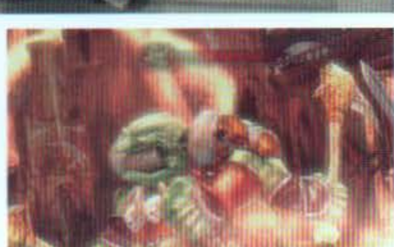


An indication of the sloppier side of the package is that gameplay-critical elements have not benefited from obvious design choices – the differentiation between different types of element, for example, is indistinct



Eye Of Judgment's creature design is interesting, although it's surprising that the game hasn't been able to get more out of its host hardware given how little is usually happening onscreen





Even the implementation of the Eye itself is clumsy. To have the game function properly you need to align the board and camera in such a way that the video feed on screen matches with the grid overlay – it is inexcusably fiddly to get right given that this is the game's raison d'etre. Commands that you might expect to be executed via the camera, such as selecting different squares on the grid, need the controller's D-pad instead, and it's easy to confuse the game into needing a reboot by waving a 'cancel move' card in front of the Eye.

The *Eye Of Judgment* doesn't justify itself in either one of the two media it so uncomfortably straddles. Its basic notions of gameplay are not without merit but, simply as a strategic card game, it never convinces that it has the depth of its forebears like Magic: The Gathering or, indeed, bridge – a game which doesn't require the constant acquisition of newer card packs at great expense. **[4]**



In these days of procedural animation we might be excused for demanding more from *Eye Of Judgment*'s combat sequences, particularly since they are a major focus

And stretch



The game comes with a set of awkward instructional videos, aimed to introduce the player to the basics of the game – there's a fair amount to take in, and the choice to make these non-interactive when so many other games manage more integrated tutorials is baffling. Even more unnerving is the manner in which they are delivered – the voiceover's tone falls somewhere in the uncanny void between Crypt Keeper and yoga instructor. At least it encourages good manners – *Eye Of Judgment* etiquette demands a handshake before play begins. Quite so.



WIPEOUT PULSE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OCTOBER 26
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: STUDIO LIVERPOOL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E175

Game net match



Online is fully integrated into *Pulse*. Though not live at the time of reviewing, ship liveries can be designed on its website for download into the game, and the game itself supports online and local racing, plus exchange of event grids and lap times. It also integrates access to the wipeoutpulse.com website, which will act as a rather more sophisticated version of that found in *Pure*, offering content downloads (already, four packs are promised). More of the divergent imagination found in *Pure*'s packs will be welcome.

As one of PlayStation Portable's launch games, *Wipeout Pure* did an enormous amount to demonstrate its processing oomph, the vivid pleasures of its screen and the reinvigorating surprise of downloadable new content. With only itself to prove, you might think that *Pulse* has a much less substantial battle ahead of it, but as another update to a 12-year-old series it often feels as if SCEE Liverpool is scrabbling for ideas to keep the series fresh.

Which isn't to say that *Pulse* doesn't offer anything less than a high quality racing experience. At heart the racing is much the same as ever, although the handling model has been tightened ever so slightly since *Pure*: *Pulse*'s 12 ships are a tiny bit sprightlier, the courses are twistier to match, and the old, slow Vector speed has been dropped. A welcome introduction is the mag-strip, an area of track to which your craft sticks that allows for thrillingly bumpy sections and wonderfully dramatic vertiginous tracks like Metropia. But recycling pick-ups to replenish shield energy, the side-shift move and barrel-roll boost return entirely intact, and Phantom speed is as terrifyingly fast as ever.



The Amphiseum features an incredibly high jump (above), and other tracks have tight loop-the-loops, made possible by the mag-strip. The result is a more spectacular set of courses that are a pleasure to learn for each of *Pulse*'s four speed classes

Newer are the visuals, which are even smoother, brighter and sharper than *Pure*'s. In motion and through its photo mode (a simplified take on *PGR3*'s), *Pulse* never fails to look less than beautifully composed and perfect in its scope. Trackside architecture and details are varied, characterful and imaginative, and ensure each course is memorable, from the deco-futurist mash-up of De Konstruct to the heavy industrially infected pastorals of Talon's Junction. Indeed, each race is preceded by a flythrough of the course that highlights its major sights and is accompanied by a voiceover explaining its setting and history. The polish extends to the audio, too – you can now hear a whir as the airbrakes are applied, along with lots of location-specific ambience.

Before you experience all this, of course, you'll have navigated *Pulse*'s attractively overhauled menu system. Here its main new concept is apparent – the inception of a campaign mode composed of a 'grid' of different events. Score enough points in each grid by entering the events you wish and the next will be opened up, something of a release from the chore that unlocking all the courses and speed classes was in *Pure*. There are a lot of events, however – 235, in fact – spread over 16 grids. To obsessive-compulsive medal hunters, campaign mode represents a daunting challenge, not so much in terms of difficulty than sheer time and effort.

For those less exacting, campaign unlocks courses and race modes for use in Racebox, which allows you to create single races and entire grids of events with as much variation as those found in the main campaign. You can set target times for time trials, weaponless half-grid contests for race purists, or a 200-kill Elimination marathon (a mode that returns from *Wipeout 3*). The choice, as they say, is yours – if you didn't have enough to do already.

The problem is that *Pulse*'s innovations are squarely set on its excellent presentation. Once the initial interest in the shiny new statistics screen or sharing homemade race grids with other players has worn off, it boils down to metronomic scoring off of races, one after the other. Sure, it's another great instalment of *Wipeout*, but under the gloss it's little more.

Zone returns once again, the mode in which speed automatically and gradually increases and the aim is to survive as long as possible. And once again it features an abstract visual style, but is restricted to the game's 12 main tracks rather than the extras found in *Pure*'s







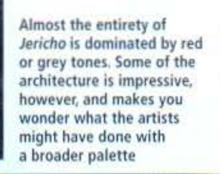




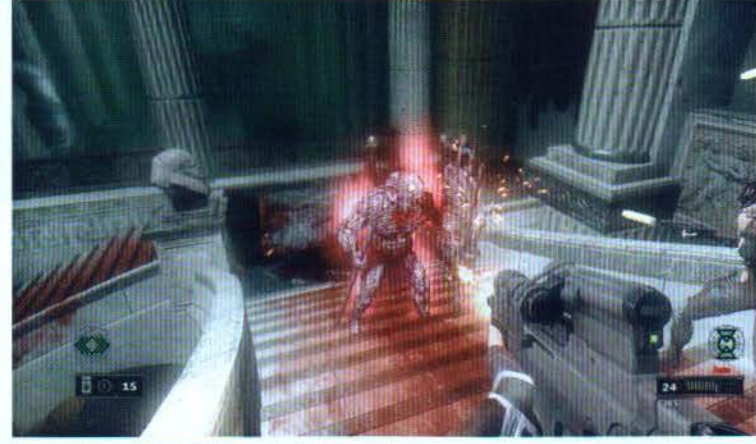


***Pulse* introduces a new play mode, Speed Lap, in which players have seven laps in order to beat a certain time. The return of Eliminator is to be applauded for its chaotic contrast to the purity of other modes**





Almost the entirety of *Jericho* is dominated by red or grey tones. Some of the architecture is impressive, however, and makes you wonder what the artists might have done with a broader palette



CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OCTOBER 26 PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS DEVELOPER: MERCURYSTEAM ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E179

In recently and so vocally defending videogaming's artistic credentials, Clive Barker has set himself up for a fall. *Jericho*, a horror-themed squad-shooter, designed under close instruction from Barker himself, will inevitably come under scrutiny by videogame detractors in the mainstream press, who will be delighted by the fact that the game offers precious little to bolster the integrity of the medium.

Jericho's plot follows the eponymous squad of leather-clad psychic soldiers as they battle to close a rift that will otherwise unleash a terrible evil – a perfunctory excuse for Barker to pummel the player with an endless deluge of peeled corpses, rivers of blood, excrement, sadomasochistic psychic Nazis and mild misogyny.

But though the flayed flesh flies, it's difficult to find any of it affecting in the way Barker presumably intends: horror, you quickly realise, is a matter of contrast with the mundane. Hellraiser's Pinhead was terrifying because of his intrusion into the real world, a family home. Here, the only touchstone with reality is the group of implausible goths who make up Jericho Squad – and, as a result, the game's ability to shock is annulled through relentless, homogenous gore.

Occasionally, you can't help but admire the gory excess of some of Barker's creations – flying, disembowelled children who slap you with drooping, tendril-like veins are a momentary highlight – but the game juggles precious little variety for the most part. This is *Jericho*'s real problem, and it's one that extends beyond its hackneyed stylings: there is a functionally sound squad-shooter at the game's core, but its ambitions are hampered by repetitious and unimaginatively staged combat. It's a missed opportunity, because *Jericho*'s six-strong squad is an interesting tactical proposition, made up of characters with specific abilities between which you can easily switch your control. The chaingun-wielding Delgado can unleash a fire demon to immolate enemies; Black can steer her bullets with telekinesis; Church can cast blood magic, pinning enemies in place before finishing them with a single sweep of her katana. While the remaining squad members act as support, the specialisation of these three primary roles – heavy, sniper and melee – has the chance to add real diversity to the battles.

It's a diversity that is rarely exploited, however, as most of the battles amount to simple attrition against waves of enemies that you've fought many times before. Though *Jericho* is not wholly incompetent in its execution, it is unambitious. The game's failure to monopolise on its squad dynamic relegates it to a shooter-by-numbers, and its appeal is then further undercut by the fact that, while Barker clearly has a sense for the grotesque, it is the only note that *Jericho* plays. Hardly a compelling argument for videogaming's potential, then. **[5]**



Some of the boss battles demand tactics; most are just damage sponges. This boss can be defeated by standing still and simply unloading a chaingun into his belly

The Hellbound Tart



Billie Church, a magic Dixieland ninja with prominent cleavage and a penchant for fetish gear, will quip to enemies: "You just had your ass kicked by a girl". Delgado jokes that when lesbian Black gets possessed by a spirit, it's the first time she's had a man inside her. Certain enemies have vaginal weakspots you're tasked with attacking. As with much of Barker's work, there is preoccupation with sexual violence and sadomasochism here, and, although these are valid avenues to explore, there remains something unpalatable about *Jericho*'s dialogue and characterisation. Or maybe we just don't wear enough black.



Although there are plenty of combat options, many of the squad's special abilities are only useful in occasional context-sensitive situations – Jones can astrally project himself to pull levers, for example, but this is the only use for his ability









CONAN

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: NIHILISTIC SOFTWARE

Most days must be gloomy at Nihilistic Software, but it might well have been a particularly dark one when the company was handed the Conan licence and charged with creating a hack'n'slash adventure. It's hardly a fresh concept, and looking at the boxart or title screen may be enough to make some gamers turn away with a sense of ennui. To do so would be a mistake, because from an unpromising starting point Nihilistic has crafted an accomplished game that not only adds to its genre but is capable of standing next to some of its best exponents.

The combat system is where the game excels, and it is finely pitched between a real challenge (on Hard) and skin-clawingly difficult (on King), featuring several of the basics familiar from other titles in the genre: counter-attacks, rolls via the right analogue stick, a block button, and the ability to upgrade your capabilities as you progress. But in the balancing of these elements it is finessed: blocking, for example, needs to be weaved into your repertoire as the precursor to attacks; you quickly learn to block just as a foe's weapon is about to strike, initiating a parry. At this point, the entire battle slows down for a moment while a button for your options (dependent on the enemy's position) appears. Get it right, and the foe is eviscerated – literally – before they even realise they've missed you. An attacking horde can be sawn in half in a handful of seconds, but if you're not up to the job they'll do the same to Conan. The combat is fast, brutal, and highly engaging to play and watch, and learning when to attack, parry, dodge and block on the later levels is a significant and rewarding challenge. The only disappointments arrive via boss battles, which try for a sense of scale but are often deflating, with simple solutions and repetitive challenges next to the more free-flowing fights that comprise the rest of the game.

Level design is unremarkable for the most part, though well realised and not devoid of innovative moments, studded as it is with traps and puzzles that demand some rearranging of the environments as well as agility, while Conan's catlike movement as he scales walls and jumps between brickwork is particularly well animated. Ultimately, the puzzles will not stop players in their tracks, and serve instead to provide breathers before the next hapless horde comes along to meet their messy death.

Also worthy of note is the fidelity of Conan's character, down to the 'sullen blue eyes' and bad attitude of Howard's original stories. The game is full of moments that feel as much part of the Conan mythos as big swords, including buxom maidens you frequently find chained to walls, bereft of all clothing apart from their pants. Release them by yanking the chain loose (with your bare hands, naturally) and some will beg to repay you, while others will simply say, "Crush me with your love, barbarian". It's all highly daft, but in its context comes across as such, rather than an attempt to be smutty.

Conan is a genuine surprise. It's not innovative in its entirety, but it does almost as much as it can with the central concept, and thus proves one of the better examples of the hack'n'slash genre. **[7]**



The game is chock-full of animations that brutalise and dismember your opponents from various positions – there's even a 'shield beheading' option for those annoying bad guys who just keep on blocking your weapon







The boss battles are always visually explosive (see below), but the actual combat can often prove less engaging. Finales, however, are always authentically gruesome



One potato, two potato



Conan's **most original addition to the genre is the ability to pick up almost every weapon seen or used by the enemy (whether by killing them first or using one of the later, and highly amusing, disarm/kill combos). There's a reasonably large number of weapons with different techniques to be mastered, though they tend to fall into one of four main groups: one-handed, one-handed with shield, dual-wielded, or two-handed. Each of these different possibilities has its own set of attacks that can be learned and mastered, and being aware of how different enemies react to different combinations of weapons makes the difference between victory and defeat.**



RACE 07: THE OFFICIAL WTCC GAME

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** £30 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI **DEVELOPER:** SIMBIN
PREVIOUSLY IN: E180







RACE 07's cars are suitably detailed, but some circuits can look barren. Simbin fans will be watching its 3D tech developments closely

After the rapturous reception *GTR2* received, Simbin was perfectly poised to make a big impression with its next title, *RACE: The WTCC Game*. The end result was somewhat underwhelming – there could be no aspersions cast towards the slavish replication of the sport, but while *RACE* performed the touring car bump'n'grind beautifully, the absence of the aspirational marques and GATSO-frying top speeds that *GTR2* had provided made it seem dowdy and unremarkable.

The seasonal update reaches a little further. Fans who have followed Simbin's evolution from the beginning have long hoped for the team to tackle open-wheeled racing cars, and with the new F3000 and Formula BMW the development team has successfully added another simulation string to its bow. In line with Simbin's uncompromising approach to realism, these new vehicles have not been romanticised in the slightest and, when pushed to their limits, the subtleties of the handling model and physics engine are made joyously apparent. Mate the game with a solid force-feedback steering wheel and a right foot with some degree of finesse and the experience gains a bracing layer of authenticity.

It's these details that will determine whether *RACE 07* lives or dies. The Gmotor2 engine is clearly showing its age, so this is not a title that will attract newcomers, or indeed aesthetes in general. Instead, its fortunes rely on satisfying a burgeoning community of simulation racers, for whom authenticity is the top priority, and in that respect it's a success. Once again the series at the game's core, the World Touring Car Championship, is modelled in its entirety to 2007 specification and the move towards street circuits has been extremely kind to *RACE 07*. Slavish recreations of the newly inducted Pau and Porto circuits provide the tight turns and knife-edge racing that touring cars are famous for, and offer roadside distractions beyond those seen around the standard collection of wind-blasted airfields.

With Codemasters moving away from licensed racing series and towards *Project Gotham*-inspired street racing, Simbin appears to be one of the last remaining bastions for racing fans who demand strict adherence to the sporting canon. Unfortunately, casual racing fans, used to the visual splendour of *Colin McRae Dirt* and *Forza Motorsport 2*, will judge its low-poly models, murky textures and slightly nicotine-stained lighting justifiably harshly. **[7]**



JUICED 2: HOT IMPORT NIGHT

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, PS3 **PRICE:** £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW (PS2, 360), OCTOBER 26 (PC, PS3)
PUBLISHER: JUICE GAMES **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

It would take courage and a great deal of self-belief to turn up at the real Hot Import Nights – a leading tuning exhibition – to have your creation judged by the crowd. But, in effect, that is what Juice Games is doing showing up on the tuning videogame scene with *Juiced 2*. Its predecessor, while hardly must-buy material, did provide the odd fresh take on a subgenre long dominated by EA's *Need For Speed*. The sequel is suitably more ambitious, though not necessarily any more successful.

The standard elements are all present, of course. Buy your car, paint it, mod it, tune it and then hit the international tarmac in races, time trials, elimination rounds, pink-slip challenges, crew races and drift events, to name the most obvious. Certainly, *Juiced 2* can't be criticised for being short on content – each of the Career mode's leagues offers an increasing number of goals to be met, though cleverly not all have to be completed in order to open up the next round, offering a welcome level of choice.

There are neat touches, too, not least in the way you take on challenges to unlock more advanced mods or the fact those come in handy tuning packages, as well as enhancements to the franchise's in-game gambling aspect and the game's considerable online aspects. Just some examples indicating that Juice has given some thought to injecting novelty into the otherwise generic subject matter.

Less encouraging is the handling model itself. There's no denying that throwing a car sideways into corners with complete abandon is fun, but part of the thrill is the risk you take. Remove that element – *Juiced 2*'s driving dynamic couldn't be more easygoing without offering an autopilot option – and you effectively diminish the level of satisfaction.

The exception are the drift events, where the game may actually lead its genre. It's exaggerated, but the ability to drive your vehicle purely on the throttle, while using the in-car perspective and seeing the points mount up as you chain one glorious powerslide into the next, can be terrifically rewarding.

That's not to say other elements can't thrill – coming to within 0.05s of losing a lovingly (and expensively) built car in a pink-slip event certainly raises the pulse. Overall, though, the 'fast car, phat beats' experience feels a little underpowered. And, crucially, you'll find it done better elsewhere. **[6]**



For the most part, the competitor AI stands up. The 'driver DNA' seems gimmicky, but does offer some indication of an individual's on-track nature





A welcome addition is the ability to play the Career mode online, the caveat being that this is entirely separate from the offline equivalent and therefore means cars are not interchangeable between the two





MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM 2

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (STUDIO ONE)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E175

Having already shifted 1.8 million units, *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* is by some margin Japan's biggest-selling PSP title to date. While such rabid consumption is not uncommon in Japan's notoriously brand-led marketplace, you'd do well to find one of those 1.8 million who feel short-changed by their purchase, regardless of the superficial changes implemented since the PS2 game *Monster Hunter 2* – of which this is a portable remake.

Perhaps Japanese gamers, known for throwing themselves into their pastimes, can empathise with the plight of their self-designed character. For their existence as a hunter-gatherer among a small mountain-top community is, for the longest time, a story of isolation and solitude. Adopting the kind of repetitious tutoring better suited to expanding a parrot's vocabulary, *Freedom 2* throws hour upon hour of lower-level tasks at the player, at once frustrating the experienced and alienating first-timers. The latter group may also find the concept of an RPG that rarely strays far from the village in which it begins as bewildering as the fact that they have to grind without even the rising increments of bar charts to act as a manifest incentive.

However, the stubborn persistency of the learning curve exists to help newcomers understand the nuances of a series that subverts the norms of the RPG, yet paradoxically observes them rigidly. So while they barely get to explore its landscapes, the complexity of the combat ensures that weary hunters aren't short of stories to tell. Relatedly, the breadth of tactical acumen required to defeat *Freedom 2*'s roster of beasts ensures that the reward for grinding is not about arbitrary statistical boosts but a more practical thing: the experience to teach you the technique that will take down the more troublesome foes.

Monster Hunter is at its best in multiplayer, and Capcom is keen to address this, throwing up difficulty spikes that encourage users to dip into its ad-hoc co-op mode to overcome them. Though not a standalone mode in itself (it piggybacks off singleplayer) and not online, persistent players will find it to be one of the best multiplayer experiences on PSP. **[7]**





Like all RPGs that have you hunting in packs, success relies heavily on respecting the job class allocated to you, but rather than funnelling players down one route, all weapon classes are available at all times. Being able to call yourself a bowman requires experience on the field of play



Injured – or just plain timid – prey will often flee the battle, necessitating a rethink of strategy. Paintballs can tag fleeing beasts for easy reference on radar, while traps can be set to capture the bounty passively



PURSUIT FORCE: EXTREME JUSTICE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £25 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: BIGBIG
PREVIOUSLY IN: E178



The Justice meter, built up through good road manners and focused ultra-violence, still feels undeveloped. Though it offers health top-ups, rocket attacks and slow-motion mid-air kills, it remains an idea waiting to be properly exploited

There's a pleasant direct-to-video charm creeping into the PSP game library, and few titles summed up that sense of uncomplicated fun as enjoyably as *Pursuit Force*. A frantic mess of cops-and-robbers that made up for its budget stylings with generosity and flair, there was plenty to like in the gymnastic car-to-car firefights of Bigbig's original title. There was plenty to fix, too, notably uneven difficulty, and plodding on-foot sections. The sequel offers more of the same: it's still fun, and it still has problems.

The good news is that, behind the wheel of a car or boat, the action is as exhilarating as it ever was. The original's elegant controls remain largely unchanged, making it easy to leap from one hurtling vehicle to another and rack up kills with real swagger. This is a kinder experience than the first outing, however, with improved handling and less emphasis on endless mission restarts.

On foot, an option that seems increasingly common this time, things are less successful. The PSP's single nub makes for imprecise controls, and while running and gunning around simplistic AI and endless supplies of exploding barrels is no disaster, it remains a chore made enjoyable only by a quirky choice of sound effects, which suggests that this particular action hero is doling out justice while wearing clogs.

The plot, such as it is, is a bizarre, guilty pleasure, pinwheeling schizophrenically between camp laughs and intense drama (there's both a wedding and a funeral in the first 40 minutes), while finding time to cram in a baffling selection of racial stereotypes. And while *Pursuit Force* still struggles to provide any real variety to its missions, it instead piles on the permutations – car on tank, car on tram, chopper on fire truck – with the pressurised inventiveness of a jaded automotive pornographer.

The meshing of racing and crime-fighting may not be entirely successful yet – in the heat of the moment it's still a little too easy to overtake the car you're meant to be chasing, which can spoil the thrill somewhat – but by and large, Bigbig's game provides plenty of cheap excitement. It's a throwback, for sure, and there's little in the way of innovation, but *Extreme Justice* is brash, pacy and pleasingly mindless, settling nicely into that select pile of games that remain far from perfect but enduringly hard to dislike. **[6]**



***Extreme Justice* has breadth as well as length: alongside ad-hoc multiplayer, Bounty missions allow you to replay levels to unlock extras, and Challenge missions give you specific objectives**

ACE COMBAT 6: FIRES OF LIBERATION

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 23
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO



Electronic Support Measure units give lethal targeting assistance to nearby allied units, rockets fired within radar range almost sure to hit their target. Allied strikes, meanwhile, are awarded for completing objectives: simply punch the D-pad to send available ground and air units after every target onscreen

At the very least, *Ace Combat* isn't going to lose itself any fans. It still feels as much like Star Wars and The Guns Of Navarone as it does Top Gun. It still knows how to make missile contrails and flashing diamonds sexy. It knows how to string you along via numerous plot twists and false endings. And it still feels like being inside a washing machine for half an hour.

The story, which is substantial, adds yet another fictitious conflict to the canon, this time between the neighbouring countries of Emmeria and Estovakia. A 15-mission campaign follows a familiar pattern of cutscene, briefing, mission and debriefing, but each now adds a more distinct, methodical backdrop to the quickfire dogfights and bombing runs. An ensemble of interweaving war stories – in which the rendering is effective and the voice-acting isn't – comprises the bulk of its CG, while the old trick of blending military and civilian in-flight radio chatter works well.

But it's the missions, each a series-standard length of around 30 to 40 minutes, which benefit most from the series' newfound economy. A new 'Dynamic Operation System' gives you a number of different ground and air units to chaperone, each with its own role in a global objective. Boats, helicopter squadrons, eye-in-the-sky planes, tank platoons and commando units all come into play at one point or other, a certain degree of plate-spinning required by their requests for air support. Because there's no strict sequence of waypoints and targets, however, and no tyranny of ruthless timers or energy bars, it's brilliant. Given the Japanese knack for making games impossible, this one's a saint.

In fact, given developers' general distaste for hardware generation jumps – how many series take a genuine step forward when stepping up? – *Ace Combat*'s arrival on 360 is euphoric. For the first time, it feels like the game that Namco has long been trying to make. The overdue barrage of online modes, comprising 16-player solo and team deathmatches, co-op missions and leaderboards, lives up to expectations, with a wealth of downloadable content already under test. And the visuals? Well, if you want more screenshots, just pop your head out of the window and look up. **[8]**



It wouldn't be *Ace Combat* without a sci-fi superweapon blotting out the sun; this game has two. The first (and best) is the Aigaion, a jet-powered aircraft carrier flanked by four flying fortresses. The inevitable dogfight, in which clusters of cruise missiles punish those who stray out of range, is among the series' best

DEWY'S ADVENTURE

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £35 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 23
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

A state-shifting globule of an avatar that exists within a world that tilts as the controller does: the comparisons between *Dewy's Adventure* and Wii stablemate *Mercury Meltdown* are inevitable, yet in actuality the two share little in common beyond the premise. Well, perhaps that and their ability to evoke frustration. In Konami's effort, however, the game's obstinate nature seems more a by-product of blunt level design rather than sharp developer wit.



Coming from the same studio that forged *Elebits*, it should be no surprise that *Dewy* contains a similar map editor, but the limited online modes hamper the mileage that can be derived from it

Effectively a platformer in which you control the environment rather than the character, *Dewy's Adventure* raises the level of interactivity beyond that of its peers by allowing control over the gameworld's temperature. A tap on the Remote's directional pad raises or lowers the heat level accordingly, often with dramatic effect; in an instant, a grassy bank is shrouded in snow, with previously untraversable bodies of water freezing into icy walkways. However, the effect on the environment is never more dramatic than that which occurs to the game's titular hero: being a water-based organism, Dewy is subject to the whims of the hydraulic cycle, allowing him to evaporate into an inert cloud or form an ice-block capable of powerhousing its way through obstacles. Although this mechanic often offers the occasional poser (often revolving around the activation of switches), in truth, *Dewy's Adventure* rarely threatens to fulfil even a fraction of the potential its gameworld rules offer. The molecule-shifting dynamic is at least responsible for Dewy's biggest success, which ironically comes in an arena where the genre is traditionally at its weakest. The boss battles, echoing *Zelda*, have a sense of the epic and require versatility of thought to overcome. (Highlights include an oversized gecko whose main offensive weapon – its tongue – can be frozen to the ground with a well-timed climatic change.)

The meat of the game remains enjoyable yet underwhelming. The sensitivity of the controls and the scale of the levels make for an ill marriage with the fixed camera, needlessly amplifying the challenge in an otherwise pretty lightweight game. **[6]**

The simplest route to ensuring replayability is to scatter around collectables – here in the form of Dewy's friends. However, camera angles and curious level design make it difficult to put their placement into a greater context, making them a less compelling goal than *Monkey Ball*'s bananas



MY SIMS

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: EA

'Shape your community and decide who lives there', says a box on the back of *My Sims* with zeal that borders on the fascistic. This isn't *Animal Crossing*, which gave you only the crudest control over the town outside your own house. Rather, this is something much more American: an orgy of self-expression. *My Sims* affords you the freedom to change anything you like – the appearance of each of the houses and buildings in the town, their interiors and the furniture itself.

Each building and piece of furniture is made up from a large selection of building blocks, manipulated using the Wii Remote's pointer. By and large, the editor is an intuitive and flexible system that's easy to finely control with little practice. Most furniture is built using blueprints, which are awarded by town residents for carrying out construction tasks for them. Blueprints only specify basic shapes, though, as you're able to build with an impressive degree of freedom.

Much time is spent on the collection of a vast range of 'essences', which provide a palette of patterns and shapes to apply to furniture, walls and floors. The rock essence is collected by digging, green apple by shaking trees, light wood from cutting them down, sad from being nasty to residents, clown fish from fishing, and so on. Residents prefer certain essences to others, so you'll need to hunt far and wide for the ones to make the furniture they demand.

Outside of self-imposed design projects to make the town just as you want it, *My Sims*' essential gameplay boils down to doing chores, zipping between residents and your workshop (and invoking the irritatingly frequent appearance of the loading screen). But residents themselves are a colourless bunch, a series of knowing archetypes – goth girls, hip DJs, Italian chefs – that lack the effortless charm of *Animal Crossing*'s simple ciphers.

My Sims' successful stimulation of creativity allows you to claim ownership over your town, but sooner or later you'll find your interest waning: you're so powerful that the town never feels quite alive. A lesson, perhaps, for armchair despots. **[6]**





You can make residents happier by applying features to your designs that match their tastes. The system tends to encourage you to horribly encrust your work with tat to maximise its attractiveness to them, if not your own eyes



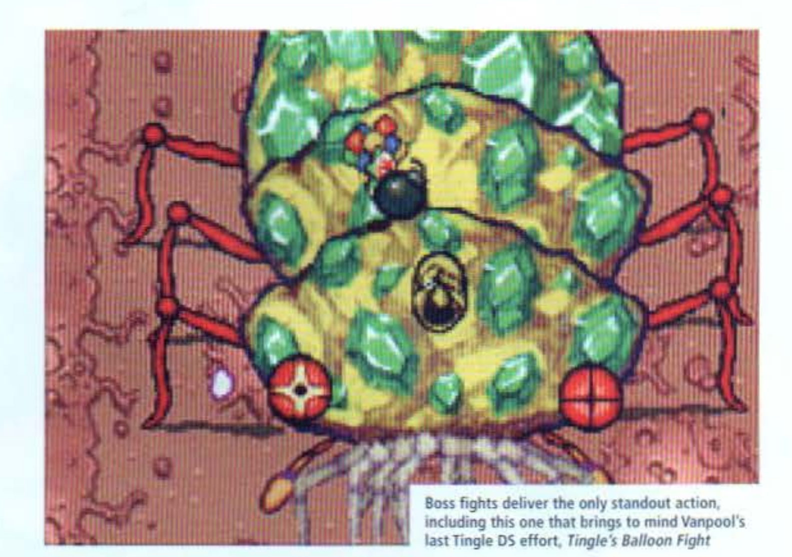


Doing tasks for key residents results in the star level of the town rising, encouraging new waves of residents to move in, more essences, and tools that allow you to access new areas



FRESHLY-PICKED TINGLE'S ROSY RUPEELAND

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: VANPOOL PREV IN: E166, E168



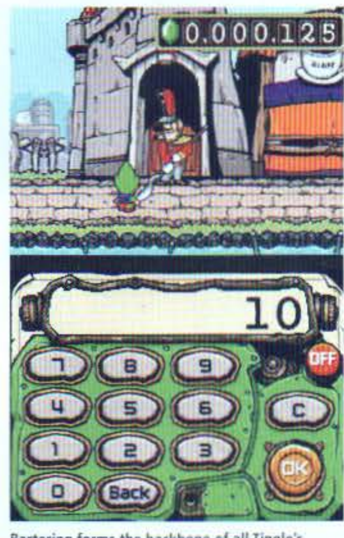
Boss fights deliver the only standout action, including this one that brings to mind Vanpool's last Tingle DS effort, *Tingle's Balloon Fight*

Greedy, snivelling, hated, lonely: these aren't the qualities of your traditional Nintendo hero, let alone one who later in his career is destined to work alongside that bastion of all things decent, Link. And yet here he is, piggy eyes bulging and arms outstretched as he grabs for a pearl. Or two rupees. Or some moss. Tingle's not picky.

In light of the sublime *Phantom Hourglass*, however, the two heroes seem worlds apart. Tingle's cartoon world is crudely rendered, the pairing of D-pad movement and point'n'click stylus-work painful on the hands and combat relegated to a control-less mess that sees Tingle lay into foes in a Hanna-Barbera-aping dust-cloud as you helplessly watch his health – his wealth – vaporise. Technically, Vanpool does for Tingle what Suzak did for Wario in *Master Of Disguise*, mistaking oafish mechanics as part of their protagonists' buffoon-like charm.

But where Suzak made the mistake of distancing Wario from his gleaming counterpart – leaving him as just another wannabe Mario – Vanpool milks the majority of *Freshly-Picked*'s humour and charm from forcing Tingle into Link's boots. And so where you expect the adventure to begin with a bright-eyed farmhand going abut his rustic duties there is instead a 35-year-old hermit, sitting at home in his vest. And when appealing to burly warriors for some dungeon assistance expect fetch-quests to be jettisoned for blunt requests to cough up the cash.

And so unfolds the grottiest quest ever to grace the DS, where the prize is not to dethrone a dark lord, but to rub shoulders with scantily clad women in a fabled Rupeeland, where boss fights conclude with a selfish scrabble for rupee shards, and the only celebratory victory jingle you're going to hear is from the boombox of a man you paid to be your friend. As clumsily as *Freshly Picked* is constructed, there are few titles as refreshingly ugly. **[6]**



Bartering forms the backbone of all Tingle's social interactions. Offer too little and money is lost with no result, offer too much and you'll deplete your funds. Run out and it's game over



TIME EXTEND



STREET FIGHTER III: THIRD STRIKE

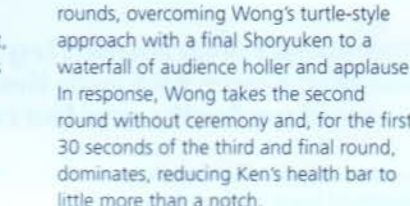
FORMAT: **COIN-OP (CPS3), DREAMCAST, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **1999**

The last mainline Street Fighter game is, from a competitive point of view, also the series' best. Indeed, one legendary tournament fight caused the game its very own Time Extend

It's one of competitive gaming's most famous and repeatedly viewable sequences. Not only the kind of heart-quickening, Rocky-style comeback that is unforgettable when witnessed in sports played at the highest levels, but also a battle partly responsible for a resurgence of interest in the game in which it took place. In 57 short seconds *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike* experts Daigo Umehara and Justin Wong demonstrate, with more precision and eloquence than any amount of words could, exactly what makes this game the king of the competitive 2D fighting genre.

In 2004, Evolution, the US's largest and most prestigious fighting game tournament (this year the event was sponsored by Toyota and Capcom and distributed over $90,000 in winnings), was held at Cal Poly University in Southern California. Around 700 of the best competitive fighting game players converged to do battle across nine different games from 2D classics like *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* through to the latest iteration of *Virtua Fighter*. Spectators came to watch as one of gaming's most competitive and dedicated scenes prepared to crown its heroes.

That year *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* was one of the titles on the roster. The game, the third and final iteration of *Street Fighter III*, had previously been dropped from the event due to dwindling numbers signing up to compete in it. Its reintroduction to the tournament had been thanks to a small but dedicated group of enthusiasts, insistent that the game's depths and intricacies make it ideal for tournament play. The introduction of a parrying system, in particular, whereby players can turn around opponents' attacks by pushing forwards at the exact moment of contact, both on the ground and in the air, allows for incredibly free-flowing and exciting matches between skilled players.



The game's depths and intricacies make it ideal for tournament play, in particular the introduction of a parrying system

As such there was a large and boisterous turnout for the game's losers' final, a match between New Yorker Wong and the previous year's bronze medallist, Tokyoite Umehara. Today, watching the footage – which has enjoyed cumulative views totalling well over a million on YouTube alone – is mesmerising. As each man sits down to fight, a blanket of hush settles upon the darkened hall. Banks of monitors stretch from the front to the back over the congregation as all eyes fix upon Daigo's Ken, suited in a white gi. He begins darting back and forth, jabbing at Wong's Chun-Li, an equally recognisable character who was only reintroduced to *Street Fighter III* in *Third Strike*.

Daigo ably takes the first of the three rounds, overcoming Wong's turtle-style approach with a final Shoryuken to a waterfall of audience holler and applause. In response, Wong takes the second round without ceremony and, for the first 30 seconds of the third and final round, dominates, reducing Ken's health bar to little more than a notch.

"Rare footage of Daigo actually angry," notes the match's commentator as the man from Japan switches tactic



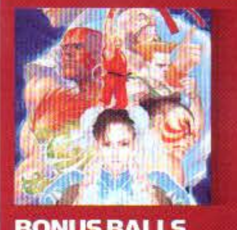




The Super Arts system is an orthodox invention whereby attacks inflicting damage as well as those that miss allow the player to build the meter to pay for special moves







BONUS BALLS

In the singleplayer game, *Third Strike* presents two bonus rounds to players following the completion of stages three and six: 'Crush the Car' and 'Parry the Ball'.

The former will be familiar to players of the classic bonus stage in *Street Fighter II* in which you're charged with destroying an SUV within a time limit. The only differences here are that there's no need to switch sides of the car – it can be destroyed from one position – and you're able to use Super Art moves to speed things along.

The 'Parry the Ball' bonus stage requires you to parry 20 basketballs thrown at you by the character Sean, an extremely useful tool for sharpening techniques.



halfway through the bout applying a more aggressive stance that the crowd, with muted oohs and aahs, takes to be a sign of desperation. The two tap sticks forward and backward, jostling, daring the other to launch into a special move. In *Street Fighter III* the parry system allows matches to turn around in an instant. While straightforward blocking in *Street Fighter* games leaves a player with a second's 'block stun', during which time they are unable to act, there is no such penalty for a successful parry. Here the player is immediately able to launch into any move they choose, an incredibly open-ended system when compared to, for example, *Virtua Fighter* or *Tekken* where similar moves initiate predetermined follow-up attacks.

Nevertheless, with Daigo in such a dire situation, to most observers it seems surely only a matter of time before Wong



Taunting is more than for show – each one provides an additional benefit if completed successfully: Ryu's will lower his stun gauge, and Q's raises his maximum stamina

Seven hits with the left leg and Chun Li shifts her weight. Seven hits with the right leg, every one parried perfectly, and the crowd is on its feet

is able to chip away at the millimetres of remaining health for an easy victory. Then Daigo lands a fireball, and a second and, as Chun-Li recoils, he rushes in and throws her to the floor, sending debris in the 2D background clattering around. Wong's health now stands just under the halfway mark while Daigo's remains almost completely depleted.

As if to suffocate Daigo's comeback, Wong chooses this moment to input the two quarter-turns to execute Chun-Li's 15-part Houyoku-Sen Super Art. The camera zooms in on Chun-Li for a split second, blue electricity crackling across the screen, before she leaps forward for the final kill, a vicious flurry of heavy Capcom animation. A cascade of calculations fire in both players' minds. If Daigo is to let a single hit from Chun-Li's special move hit his character, it's immediate game over. Similarly, if Daigo simply blocks each of the 15 moves, the force from each blow will quickly deplete his guard gauge and it's immediate game over. There's only one choice left open to him.

As Chun-Li's left leg swings up towards Ken's head, Daigo executes a parry, earning a tech bonus and deflecting the move. Again and again the individual strikes from her flurry of attacks are parried: there is no room for error in handling this exactingly difficult timing. Seven hits with the left leg and Chun-Li shifts her weight. Seven hits with the right leg, every one parried perfectly, and the crowd is on its feet, cheering in disbelief and something like awe.

Chun-Li's body swivels and her head nearly touches the floor as an outstretched left leg swipes at Ken's head for the final move in the infamous Super Art. Daigo launches his character into the air and executes an air parry (*Street Fighter Alpha*'s Air Block system was removed from *Third Strike* to limit the number of defensive options available to an airborne player: there is simply no other choice here).

A split-second later, on his return to earth, Daigo's Ken kicks Chun-Li in the face. Her recoil lasts long enough to allow a leg sweep once he hits the ground. Two quarter-turns and a heavy



As with many Capcom games before it, *Third Strike* features glorious artwork and sees certain match-ups receive specific pre-game animation sequences. In the classic Ryu vs Ken tussle, for example, the characters touch fists before the fight commences

In the singleplayer game you can choose between two opponents before each round, a novel system that lets players pick enemies they're strong against















The resolution of the game is noticeably lower than that of the *Guilty Gear* series but the weight and style of the animation throughout is second to none. It was one of the few titles to be released for Capcom's ill-fated CP33 board, along with *Warzard* and *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*

kick press and time stands still. During that forever of a fraction of a second, the screen darkens and the camera zooms in on Ken to herald a special move. Everybody realises what's going to happen. Ken's right leg is coiled against his body while Chun-Li stands frozen, eyes shut and incapacitated. The crowd screams and jumps and the action resumes: Shippu Jinraikyaku pummels her torso, emptying her health chunk by chunk as the background burns with red and orange anime streak lines, a fitting and triumphant graphical flourish for what would go on to become one of the most famous one-on-one videogame battles ever recorded.

Since this match, *Third Strike* has topped the bill at the Evolution fighting tournament and the game has seen its global popularity rise and rise, a rare development for a title of its age. The game's many intricacies and inventions aren't limited to parrying, although this is certainly the easiest to spot as an onlooker. Super Cancelling (when a player immediately cancels from a special move into a Super Art), Negative Edge (where a player executes a special move upon the release of a button rather than upon the first touch) and Kara Throwing (when a player cancels the movement initiated by a standard move and turns it into a throw to broaden the range of the throw) are all crucial techniques for top-tier play.

Detractors would argue that these deeper-level moves based around counting frames with almost inhuman prescience, while not exactly exploits, are unnecessary additions to the simpler and perhaps purer form of *Street Fighter II*. But that is to miss Capcom's intention in including them in the game. With these techniques the company has expanded the interactive toolset, the only way in which it is really able to evolve the series. Anything else, such as tweaking the speed at which play takes place or adding new characters or employing higher-resolution sprites, is simply a cosmetic refinement, of little enduring interest to the game's core audience who are looking for more ways to express themselves through the beauty of technicalities.

Indeed, *Third Strike*'s complex techniques conspire to make the game the deepest contemporary 2D fighter yet created, and their comprehensive nature has perhaps been one of the factors in Capcom's reticence to yet announce a *Street Fighter IV*. Other than the aforementioned cosmetic refinements, perhaps there is little that a sequel could do to improve on this narrow perfection, at least without changing the very rules and framework that makes *Street Fighter* the king of fighters.



GOING TO THE WIRE

Microsoft's decision a few months ago to make *Street Fighter Anniversary Collection* (the game that combines *Third Strike* and *Hyper Street Fighter II* into one generous package) compatible with Xbox 360 was a calculated one. Today there is still a lively and regular set of players who compete over Xbox Live, despite the slight slowdown that's encountered in some characters' stages. Likewise, that *Third Strike* has just been emulated on MAME over the summer will give the game yet another boost in popularity and endurance.













THE MAKING OF...
TOMB RAIDER: THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS

Core Design's next-generation Lara adventure was going to be the most dynamic, daring and darkest to date. It got the dark bit right

FORMAT: **PS2** PUBLISHER: **EIDOS** DEVELOPER: **CORE DESIGN** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **2003**

The stress fractures were clear a long time before *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* was released. In May 2002 at the E3 conference in LA, Eidos showcased 'playable' levels of the game which were little more than short animation demos. For a game due out 'imminently', it appeared woefully incomplete.

Fast forward to Sony's PlayStation Experience at Earl's Court in September the same year and the public was able to see the next-gen Lara for the first time. Able to play the opening level – set in a Parisian backstreet – the disappointment at Lara's clumsy negotiation of a dumpster followed by some awkward ladder climbing was tangible.

Stealth was a token gesture, infuriating to play and clumsily executed

On release, *Angel Of Darkness*' focus on contemporary settings and enemies did not chime with players, though a reappraisal of the game makes it one of the more talked about, at least among forum fans

"We spent an inordinate amount of time on the animation of Lara and designed the controls around the animation instead of designing the animation around the controls," explained **Jeremy Heath-Smith**, Core Design's co-founder shortly after the game was released. "We got wrapped up in that whole beautiful big animation experience. I don't know if we ever would have understood what we got wrong with the animation until the game was out. We could have easily used another two or three months. We could have used another year."

Significantly, Heath-Smith had to present the game at a buyers' conference several months before the game was released. It was an agonising experience both for the man himself and those attending. "It was the worst opening level to any game," an anonymous source tells **Edge**. "I had to sit through Jeremy Heath-Smith cursing through it while attempting to get Lara on top of a bin. It was unusual



POWER CUTS

Originally, Core wanted Lara's PS2 adventures to stretch to a trilogy of games with a supporting character capable of spawning a spin-off franchise. While the game was panned at launch it still sold in the millions and remains one of the series' most-talked-about games on fansites. Indeed, the intended spin-off character, Kurtis Trent, was meant to have a series of special powers including a Chirugai blade, farsee, power drain and telekinesis. All these were cut, though his negative traits, a relative lack of agility and few weapons, were left in, leaving some players bewildered as to why he was included in the first place. Nevertheless, he has a dedicated fansite, the Kurtis Trent Estrogen Brigade (www.kteb.net).

behaviour at a buyers' conference to say the least."

But this is the end of the story; its beginning is equally gruesome. By all accounts, *The Angel Of Darkness* was in trouble from the very start. A new team was assigned to the next-gen Lara game while the experienced *Tomb Raider* stalwarts continued to plug away at *Tomb Raider: Chronicles*, the last of Eidos' annual *Tomb Raider* hits on PS1.

After completing *Chronicles* at the back end of 2000, lead programmer **Richard Morton** moved over to *Angel Of Darkness*, and he was shocked at what he found. "The tech had to be completely rewritten from PS1 to PS2 and scrapped again when the *Chronicles* team started on the game," he explains. "We lost the first year due to *Chronicles* and only had the basic story, character models and concept art."

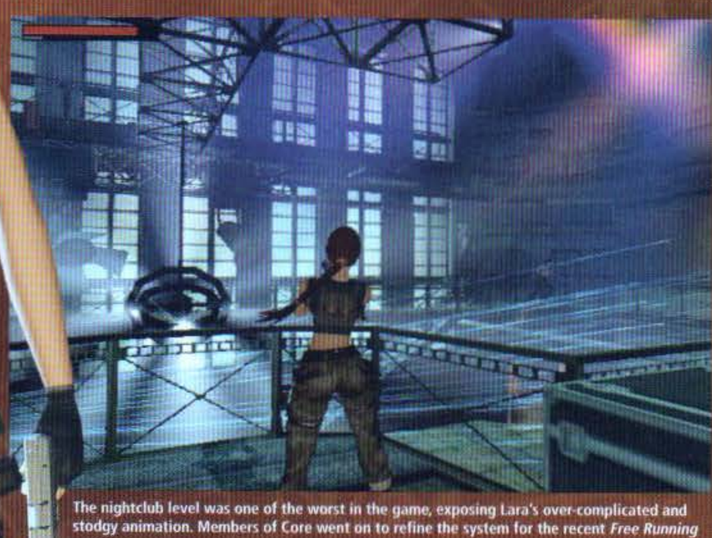
It's a classic tale of hubris, with Core's senior management boasting of innovative features to the press while the artists and programmers tried to keep up with the grand design. "The phrase 'too many cooks spoil the broth' springs to mind," continues Morton. "This, coupled with the management trying to cram every new game idea into the design – stealth from *Metal Gear*, character interaction from *Shenmue*, upgradeable attributes from RPG games, and so on. Instead of letting the team make a really great *Tomb Raider* game."

Early reports also hinted at an epic storyline spanning several games, or episodic content depending on how effusive Core's management were feeling when they spoke to the press. Charged with outlining this vision was a fresh-faced writer, **Murti Schofield**: "The *Tomb Raider* games were in a rut and needed fresh thought and direction. Would I be interested in coming over to Derby and doing a pitch? Would I! I was determined to make the most of this opportunity to pack in as much of my own thematic obsessions as I could get away with and still have it work effectively in a gaming situation. Obscure references were dropped in everywhere, in names, as locations, as clues. Background histories of characters were chronicled to depths that gave me intense satisfaction as a writer even though I knew only the tip of these biographical icebergs would ever show in the game."

Core was keen not just to give Lara's first PS2 outing a dark mood but also set it in contemporary locations. "By December of 2000 the bulk of the story, establishing scenes and supporting concepts were in place and documented," recalls Schofield. "I would say the main skeleton of 90 to 95 per cent of what we finally used was there. Then there were changes throughout the next two-and-a-bit years right up until the last possible minute but the infrastructure of the story, as it now exists in the finished game, was there."

While *Angel Of Darkness*' plot is still the subject of much fan activity, the decision to set it in contemporary locations backfired dramatically. Even lukewarm reviews pointed out how little classic tomb raiding made it into the final cut. With the first third of the game set in unpopulated Parisian streets, the Louvre, a discotheque and the city's sewers, it couldn't have felt less like an adventure. While later levels in a sanatorium and at an archeological dig were better, few players bothered to get there.

"It was only when we'd been in development for a while that we realised the world wasn't ready for episodic games," adds Morton. "We decided to concentrate on the first part as one boxed game, but even this proved too big a task for us with the time we had. Originally *The Angel Of Darkness* had four



The nightclub level was one of the worst in the game, exposing Lara's over-complicated and stodgy animation. Members of Core went on to refine the system for the recent *Free Running*









The weather effects were nicely done, but the bugs and deserted streets suggest Core never quite came to terms with the host hardware







Murti Schofield's attention to detail and a complex story involving secret societies and murder gave *Tomb Raider* conspiracy theorists lots to speculate about. The truth is no other *Angel Of Darkness* games were written, though two more were planned

distinct locations: Paris, Castle Kriegler in Germany, Prague, and Cappadocia in Turkey. We decided to cut to two, Paris and Prague, leaving Castle Kriegler in Germany and Cappadocia in Turkey as the two main locations to a proposed sequel, *The Lost Dominion*."

Practically cutting the game in half midway through its development had a deleterious affect on the team's morale and the end product felt disjointed. Players complained that plot inconsistencies, characters, clues and levels felt tagged on or made no sense in the overarching plot.

Fortunately one of the game's crowning achievements, its orchestral score, was not affected by the cuts. "These changes took place after we recorded the music and fortunately it didn't have any negative impact on what we did," explains sound designer **Peter Connelly**. "Our music still worked within each of the game's locations. If the storyline had been completely changed – with a positive plot throughout – we would've been screwed, but we were confident this was never going to happen."

Although Core was one of the first companies to receive PS2 dev kits, locking down code proved problematic. "The other main reason for the delay in my opinion was the tech side of things," explains Morton. "The PS2 hardware was still proving tricky to optimise and get the best results out of it. We were designing and building levels and characters without any real restriction on polygon budgets or memory limits, which obviously came back to bite us in the arse. Levels were shrunk and characters were dropped."

Many of the press-friendly features brainstormed into the original design were also curtailed. Lara's 'RPG' skill power-ups felt tagged on, and her stealth moves appeared limp next to those of Sam Fisher or Solid Snake. Indeed, Core planned to spawn a new franchise out of Lara's new sidekick, Kurtis Trent, but many of his abilities ended up in the bin.

"There was a lot of material that got cut and changed; the whole process was one of slash and patch, right up to the latest possible moments before release," recalls Schofield. "There were things that got left so late that their final omission left the game badly crippled, and I mourn them. One example was the range of hero abilities planned for Kurtis. He ended up as such a thin, emasculated version of the character we planned in the early stages of development that I could have wept. I may actually have done so."

"There was a lot of material that got cut and changed; the whole process was one of slash and patch, right up to the last moments"



Most players didn't bother to see the end of the Louvre level, but persistence did pay off: more interesting scenarios appeared later in the game

The story that emerges from *Angel Of Darkness*' ashes is a bleak one, with members of Core's staff leaving due to the constant changes in direction and an upper management unwilling to listen. "We weren't able to fully control the game as a team and there were far too many chiefs," concludes Morton. "As a result, the game lost direction. It was also technically a nightmare with some editors only coming online in the last eight months of development. We didn't have full character control in until a year before the game's completion – we'd been in development for ages before then."

The game that eventually emerged was beset by bugs and felt disjointed in the extreme. The situation wasn't helped by Eidos facing financial troubles. An ex-Eidos employee tells us that by March 2003 the game had already been submitted eight times to Sony and was eventually rushed out to hit the April 1 accounting deadline. Core wanted more time to polish the game, but another delay could have tipped the publisher over the edge.

Schofield's sentiments on the experience mirror those of many ex-Core employees: "*Angel Of Darkness* played like a dog and did not get good reviews. I moved on to other things, scarred and wiser, determined to follow my own path."



FINDING THE PLOT

Although *Angel Of Darkness* had plenty of issues, its plot has stood the test of time and is still the subject of much speculation and fan activity. The themes touched upon in the game include forces operating within the shadows of history, individuals with arcane skills, lost knowledge, megalithic forces, and characters with unsuspected pasts or bloodlines. "The story had to be capable of carrying three strong, standalone games over a possible six to eight years of development time," explains Schofield. "The launch of this trilogy was to be an epic, used to establish the themes and through-characters that would power the series. So the ideas had to be big and of course sustainable." While that dream was never realised Schofield has since explored similar themes and tropes in the first volume of his Shadow Histories series, The Empty Land. More info can be found online (www.shadowhistories.com/index.html).





Combat was one of the game's biggest failings, highlighting the title's unfinished state. Weapons floating across floors or opponents walking into the walls were not uncommon

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Ubisoft Reflections

DATE FOUNDED: 1985 (as Reflections Interactive); acquired by Ubisoft in 2006

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: Over 100

KEY STAFF: Gareth Edmondson, studio director; Giselle Stewart, general manager



URL: www.ubisoftgroup.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Shadow Of The Beast (1989), *Destruction Derby* (1994), *Driver* (1999), *Stuntman* (2002)





Reflections may be famous for its *Driver* titles, but its history goes back much further, with games on the Amiga, Atari ST and Mega Drive





LOCATION: Newcastle Upon Tyne

CURRENT PROJECTS: A new iteration of *Driver*, plus an unannounced title

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Located in one of Europe's most exciting cities, Ubisoft Reflections resides in the centre of Newcastle Upon Tyne. Established in the north-east of England 22 years ago, we are the leading games developer in the area. We have a rich history of AAA blockbuster releases on all major platforms, known most famously for franchises such as *Shadow Of The Beast*, *Destruction Derby*, *Stuntman* and the *Driver* series.

"Recognising our strength in the driving genre, we became part of the Ubisoft family in 2006. As Ubisoft's only UK studio, employing more than 100 people, Ubisoft Reflections is currently hard at work on the new-generation debut for *Driver*, as well as creating a brand-new franchise. Nurturing the talent and experience of our staff, we strive to enhance our lead in expansive, free-roaming worlds with our world-class vehicle handling and dynamics. Our integration within the Ubisoft group allows us to share our vast experience with other studios and tap into the amazing global talent that is Ubisoft's internal development team and create opportunities for collaboration on a wide variety of games."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: Playground Squad

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 130

URL: www.playgroundsquad.com

CONTACT: info@playgroundsquad.com; +46 23 298 55



KEY STAFF

Magnus Björkman, headmaster, Sweden; Ivar Dahlberg, lead graphical supervisor; Tobias Björkskog, lead programming supervisor; Kaj Knutsson, lead game design supervisor; Tomas Jacobsson, programming supervisor

KEY ALUMNI

Anton Wiegert, assistant technical art director at DICE; Jonas Salvador, senior artist, GRIN; Emanuel Ederyd Forsblom, game programmer, Avalanche studios; Mats Gisselson, tools programmer, Ninja Theory; Vidar Rapp, character artist, Rebellion Developments; Susanna Granlund, 3D/texture artist, Streamline studios; Patrik Vilbo, game programmer, Starbreeze studios; Jan Johansson, game programmer, SimBin







The main goal at PSQ is to give students the right knowledge and preparation to be employed at a game developer as soon as they graduate

PLAYGROUNDSQUAD



LOCATION:
Falun, Sweden;
Outukumpo, Finland;
London, UK (TBC)

COURSES OFFERED:
Courses in game programming, game design and game graphics. All studies will result in an Advanced Vocational Education and Training Diploma

INSIDE VIEW: CHRISTOPHER POWELL



"Now that I am making complicated texture maps on high-polygon models it is amazing to think that I had my first lesson in Maya just one year ago. Playground Squad excels in many ways, but there are two reasons in particular that have helped me to learn so quickly. Firstly, PSQ provides a great learning environment. We, the students, all have 24-hour access to our own workstations in a beautifully renovated building with meeting rooms, studio spaces, a kitchen, games room and even a small movie theatre. With the newest software and access to sophisticated equipment like motion-capture we have all that we need to create a game from an idea to completion. The second highlight at PSQ is the teamwork during assignments and game-making projects. I have time to experiment doing things in my own way and always have a friend to help me when I make mistakes. My second project was nominated for the Swedish Game Design Awards and my current and final project looks as though it will be even better. The staff have guided me along the way, helping me organise my work into a great portfolio. I now feel confident to apply for internships with high-profile companies."



Playground Squad's artists, coders and designers work side by side, as they would in a game dev environment

Codeshop
Tracking developments in development

Making the most of Cell

With programmers finding it difficult to take full advantage of PS3, tools company Codeplay hopes its new parallelism system will ease the pain


Andrew Richards, CEO, Codeplay

In many respects, PlayStation 3 is an anachronism. The pinnacle of Sony Computer Entertainment's decade-old philosophy that focuses on proprietary chip design to gain performance and long-term production efficiencies, it's been outflanked by Microsoft's off-the-shelf approach and Nintendo's control-is-everything attitude. And with its main architect, one-time CEO and the father of the PlayStation Ken Kutaragi, no longer in charge, it's likely that PlayStation 4 will be a very different beast.

Of course, in terms of the current console war, it's still early days. PlayStation 3 remains the most powerful gaming device, as well as providing the best future-proofed option in terms of consumer electronics, although cynics might say that at its original launch price it should've made the tea, too.

For developers, however, the dilemma is how to make the most of its exotic configuration – notably its CPU. Even now, years after the initial interest in the design has died down, Cell's configuration of one main processor driving eight Synergistic Processing Elements (SPEs) via what's called the Element Interconnect Bus (EIB) makes it one of the most fascinating pieces of silicon coders can get their hands on.

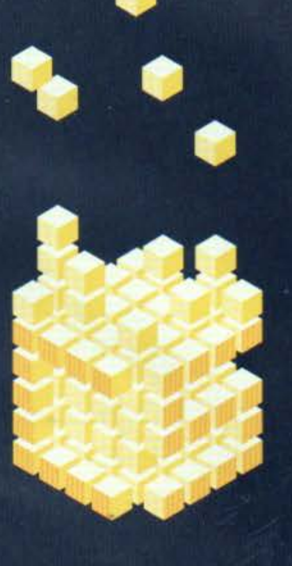


Cell's configuration makes it one of the most fascinating pieces of silicon coders can get their hands on

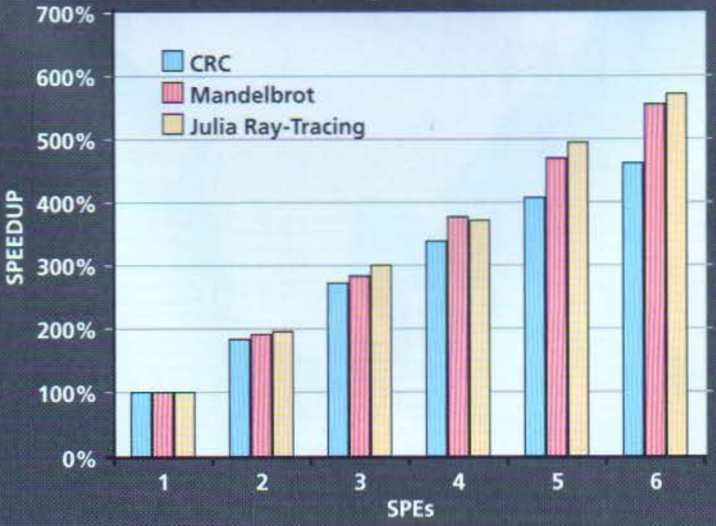
For example, outside of games, researchers at the STI Center of Competence for the Cell Processor continue to publish papers with titles such as 'Fastest Fourier Transform on Cell' and 'On the Design and Analysis of Irregular Algorithms on Cell', while its use in scientific applications such as Folding@Home, as well as MMOG hosting, demonstrates its potential. One hardware integrator, Mercury Computer Systems, recently released software which enables companies to use retail PlayStation 3s to build high-performance clusters for the analysis of data from financial transactions, oil and gas field exploration, biotechnology and video compression.

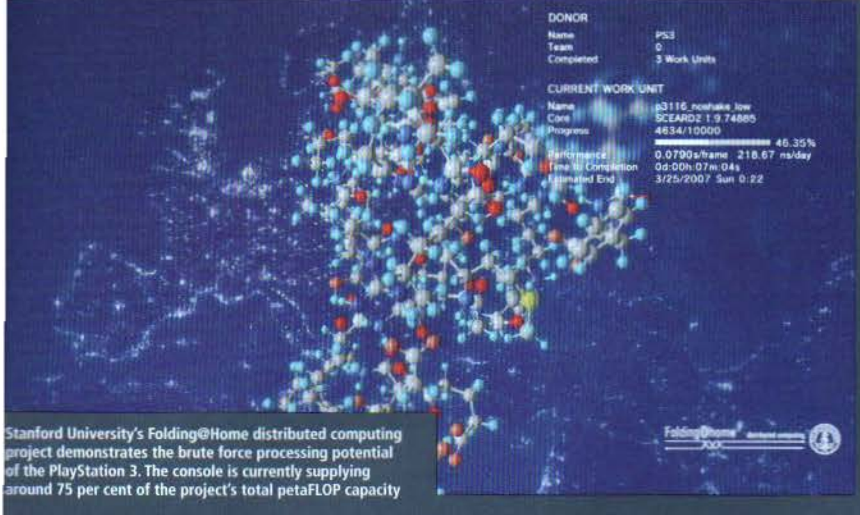
Because if there's one thing Cell is excellent at, it's handling vast amounts of information as the EIB enables high throughput while the parallelism inherent in the SPEs means tasks can be processed very efficiently. The issue for developers is making sure information is presented in the right way.

With the exception of specific architectures such as Intel's Streaming SIMD Instructions or PS2's Vector Units, few game programmers have had much experience of writing well-organised parallelised code. And games aren't the easiest pieces of software to apply to parallel hardware, anyway.



Early results from Sieve in terms of easy-to-parallel tasks such as Cyclic Redundancy Check (CRC), Mandelbrot and Julia Ray-Tracing demonstrate an almost linear improvement in performance the more SPEs you use (below). Getting similar results when it comes to more complex game code will be much harder to accomplish

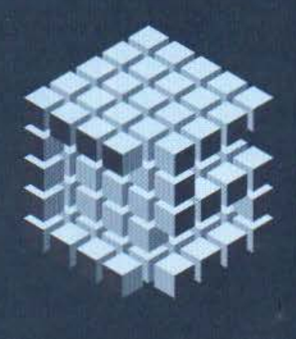




Stanford University's Folding@Home distributed computing project demonstrates the brute force processing potential of the PlayStation 3. The console is currently supplying around 75 per cent of the project's total petaFLOP capacity



This is what all the fuss is about. Designed and built by Sony, Toshiba and IBM, the Cell remains the most complex piece of silicon yet designed for consumer electronics



According to **Andrew Richards**, CEO of Scottish programming tools company Codeplay, the problem is that games work differently to scientific work.

"We've looked at various parallel programming languages such as OpenMP, which is an industry-standard way of doing parallelism, but it relies on data being in arrays rather than in data structures," he says. Incidentally, OpenMP is the basis of IBM's own research into compilers for getting the most out of Cell. "This assumption is fair enough for scientific applications but isn't true of games," Richards continues. "A lot of game data is in complex data structures because game enemies don't line up in a long line. They move around, so you need a data structure that can handle issues such as which enemies are visible at any time."

Equally, when it comes to games, the type of processing carried out on a CPU is varied, typically involving tasks such as artificial intelligence, audio and physics calculations, as well as setting up the rendering to be sent over to the graphics card. In addition, many developers have existing engines that run to hundreds of thousands of lines of code. Retrospectively getting these into shape to get the most out of the Cell part of the equation just adds further complexity to the task.

That's why, after originally setting up shop to offer its VectorC compiler for PlayStation 2, Andrew Richards and his team decided to take a different approach with PlayStation 3. Instead of working on compilers, which have to be written directly for each piece of hardware to automatically make your code run well, Codeplay's solution is its general-purpose Sieve C++ Parallel Programming System, which acts as a frontend to official compilers provided by hardware companies.

"In the past we took the view that we would take your existing program and automatically parallelise it across various processors, but with PlayStation 3 we've come to the conclusion that what you need to do is rewrite parts of your code," Richards says. "The trick is that we can ensure it's a small change and one that our tools will help you make."

The Sieve system works by forcing programmers to carefully think about which areas of their code will give the best performance boost when spread across several SPEs. Once these are defined in what Richards refers to as Sieve blocks, the system will check that there are no dependencies which would stop the code being successfully spread across multiple processors. The reason it's called Sieve is because it enables coders to sieve out data modifications from within these blocks, thus removing an enormous number of dependencies in the process.

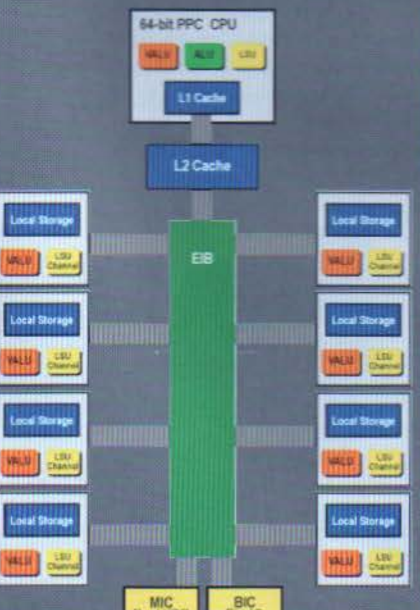
"You need an intelligent user because this isn't a case of shovelling something in one end and watching it come out as parallelised code at the other, but Sieve will give the programmers considerable assistance in terms of marking up their code and telling them if things can be parallelised or not," Richards explains.

Still, as he confesses, Sieve itself remains something of a research project at present. It's currently being sent out to various university groups and selected game companies to see how useful they find it. At best, Richards reckons it will be ready for widespread deployment in summer 2008.

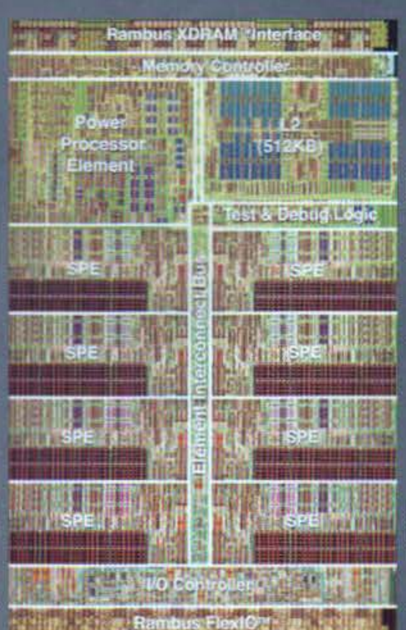
In the meantime, though, there are plenty of other companies looking to provide similar smarts. Official PlayStation 3 tools provider SN Systems is working on its own Cell-based compiler technology, while US middleware company Emergent will be offering its Floodgate data streaming API as part of its Gamebryo engine; something that's expected in early 2008. It seems as if game coders, as well as PlayStation 3 owners, will be waiting to make the most of Sony's hardware for some time to come.

You can't fight the law

One of the most interesting theoretical considerations when it comes to highly parallel programming is Amdahl's Law. This defines how much of a performance boost you can gain from parallelising your code. For example, if you parallelise 50 per cent of your code, Amdahl's Law states that the most improvement you can gain, no matter how many processors you use, is twofold. For 80 per cent parallelisation, the figure is fourfold. What's significant about the law is that it means the more of a program that can be parallelised, the better the performance boost will be. This goes against the tendency of coders to assume the biggest performance boost comes from highly optimising one small part of their game engine. When it comes to parallel code, more is more, it seems.



The CELL Architecture



Seen in both physical and schematic form, the Cell consists of a single PowerPC CPU plus eight Synergistic Processing Elements, which are all connected together by the Element Interconnect Bus. In terms of PS3, only seven SPEs are actually made available, meaning full use of them via parallelism will be an increasingly important task for future games

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

FROM BUNGIE'S LIPS TO PHIL HARRISON'S EARS

BY N'GAI CROAL

Would you believe me if I told you that I didn't filch this column topic from the September issue of **Edge**? The parallels between Bungie's Forge and Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet* have been rattling around in my head ever since Bungie announced the feature.

It wasn't until I actually brought a retail copy home, however, having finished *Halo 3* 11 days before during a marathon session in a hotel conference room under a Bungie staffer's eagle eye (a little over ten hours in twoplayer co-op on Heroic, if you must know), that I finally experienced first-hand the awe-inspiring potential of Forge. Hence the title of this column, which refers to the name of PlayStation studio chief Phil Harrison's keynote at this year's Game Developers Conference in San Francisco: 'Game 3.0: Developing and Creating for the 3rd Age of Video Games'.

> If the act of creation itself isn't playful, if it isn't entertaining, then only the most motivated people will bother to actually make anything

To make sure that I wasn't retreading ground that this magazine had already covered, I re-read the *Halo 3* issue, just to be sure. And with typical foresight and economy, there it was. A single sentence, kicking off your favourite gaming publication's description of Forge: 'Think of a cross between a standard *Halo* deathmatch and *LittleBigPlanet* and you're about there'. (Damn you, **Edge** savants! Damn you all to hell!)

What's great about both *Halo 3* and *LittleBigPlanet* coming to store shelves within the space of six to nine months is the way in which both titles, coming at the same problem from opposite ends, can help prove the viability of user-generated content on consoles. For *Halo 3*, Forge is merely one of many terrific features; for *LittleBigPlanet* user creation is just shy of being its entire raison d'être. The great leap forward that both have made – for action games, at any rate – is that the playable space and the creative space are one and the same. The slogan for *LittleBigPlanet* is 'Play, Create, Share', and it captures not only precisely the right elements of where games must go in the future, it lists them in the correct evolutionary order. Because if the act of creation itself isn't playful, if it isn't entertaining, then only the most motivated of people will bother to actually make anything. Media Molecule and Bungie, thank goodness, have ambitions on a much larger scale than having a handful of mod-makers use their tools. If they have their way, we'll all be using them.

Another insight both developers share is that amidst the massive flexibility on offer, each made a wise decision that narrowed the scope of what users can create, for the better. For *LittleBigPlanet*, which actually lets you design levels, it's that while the objects and the world are 3D, the perspective it's all viewed from is 2D. Creating 3D worlds well is a very, very hard thing to do; after all, if it were easy more of us would be pulling down architects' salaries. By restricting the game to a 2D perspective, *LittleBigPlanet* eliminates the need for us to mess with a camera, which prevents us from being disoriented and which in turn makes the game accessible to a much wider audience.

Bungie, in its own way, goes one step further: Forge doesn't let us design levels; instead, we can only edit the levels that Bungie has made. It's an excellent choice, because we gamers only *think* we want to design levels – when we get right down to it, it's tedious work that most of us just aren't any good at. Forge eliminates the tedium by leaving the hard work of level design to Bungie, and gifting us with the joy of level editing by granting us control over item placement in the always-playable environment. It's hard to imagine that most AAA games won't also be doing this by the start of the next generation of videogame consoles.

The challenge for game developers as we go forward is this: how do they expose to players the tools and principles around which their games are built, in an appealing and entertaining way, so that players can quickly and easily remix the game? Because while I'm excited about the prospects for Forge and *LittleBigPlanet*, the two have only whetted my appetite for more.

From Bungie, I wouldn't just like a list of additional features in Forge – like changing the time of day or swapping out backgrounds and skyboxes – I'd also like to see Forge extended into the singleplayer campaign, so that I can remix the encounters in story mode right down to assigning *Perfect Dark*-style Simulant personalities to the enemies. (In my *Halo 3*, fearless grunt lieutenants would boldly lead squads of cowardly armoured brutes into battle.)

From Media Molecule, I'm hoping that the company will release expansions that offer two other perspectives – top-down and isometric – thereby turning *LittleBigPlanet* into the complete 2D game creation tool. For all of us armchair game designers, the future looks bright indeed.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/


Illustration: tstokes

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

WHAT'S OUR STATUS?

BY RANDY SMITH

Picture this: it's the year 2057, and some people of the future are wearing silver jumpsuits with enormous belts, and they step out of their hovercars discussing the latest piece of interactive entertainment, and one says, "Blimey!" (Because he happens to be British). "Can you imagine what it must have been like to play a videogame back in 2007? That era was so..." So what? What will these people, with their historical perspective, think about us? Do they consider this kind of a stagnant period, that we're a pack of chumps crippled by dogmas and market forces who are taking the medium in the wrong direction? Or is this The Golden Era, where the frontiers are wide open and amazing progress happens on a regular basis? Or maybe we're unknowingly on the eve of some sort of unprecedented breakthrough that will push videogames to unimaginable achievements?

> Maybe we're on the eve of some sort of breakthrough that will push videogames to unimaginable achievements

Put it a different way: pretend there is a progress bar for the history of our art form. The far left is something like 1962 when *Spacewar* first appeared on that MIT mainframe or 1975 when the first *Pong* machines made it into homes. On the far right is the point at which we hit some theoretical plateau of progress, the moment when the medium has completely matured and been 'figured out', and we've demonstrated every major type of contribution we're ever going to make, and from now on it's just refinement and experimentation and broadening the range of topics (for the sake of not arguing, let's say that film and literature and music and painting, among other forms, have achieved this plateau). So where is our progress bar? Five per cent – we're just barely starting to crack the code? Sixty-six per cent – we're well on our way, just a few more major horizons to conquer as the right technology is invented? One hundred per cent – we are fundamentally done, this is basically as good as it gets?

Film historians will inform you far more accurately than I'm about to that it took film some time to hit its stride. The Lumière brothers who more or less invented the motion picture camera were infamously quoted as saying: "The cinema is an invention without any future" (except they said it in French, as they were French), because they thought of it as a diversion, mostly useful for alarming audiences with the spectacle of speeding dirigibles and such. It took a really long time, arguably 40 years or more, to discover the medium's unique qualities, those that make it more than just some Frankenstein-like amalgamation of photography and theatre. We can laugh spitefully at the Lumière brothers, those shortsighted rubes, but before we get extra sassy we should pause to consider the people of 2057: what will they be thinking about us?

Has a videogame ever changed your life? Contributed to a personal epiphany? Do you ever pop in a familiar game to be comforted by its unique brand of emotional resonance? I ask because to answer the question about progress, we need some vision for what games on the plateau of artistic maturity are capable of accomplishing. I also ask because I think most of us true believers would answer 'yes' to some of those questions, depending on how vulnerable we were feeling when asked, so does that imply that the progress bar is at 100 per cent and our work here is done?

I love videogames, but I kind of hope we're at more like five per cent. When I was younger I was all about the power fantasies – what proper adolescent American boy doesn't yearn to don power armour and destroy entire civilizations? But now that I'm ostensibly an adult it seems games haven't kept pace with my evolving tastes, and increasingly I find myself turning to books and movies for entertainment with relevance to my life. As a creative professional in the industry, this kind of hits home, like it's my own fault. There's 95 per cent future awesomeness out there, if we can figure out how to get at it.

Comics were originally thought limited to fantasies about crimefighting dudes with magical powers, but then a graphic novel won a Pulitzer prize and distressed the stodgy old men who run that sort of thing so thoroughly that they created a new category to keep it from ever happening again. Rock music was originally thought useful only for getting catholic girls to shake their hips imprudently, but we finally see how powerful it can be for whining about our failed relationships. Right now interactive art truly commands the topics of football players, zombies, soldiers, racing cars and plumbers. Which is badass, but what are we going to do to surprise and terrify everyone?

It's rare that a new medium is created. Apart from videogames, there's been film and maybe comics and that's it for the past few hundred years. Yet here we are writing the first few chapters of a medium's history. How cool is that? How intimidating? Um... what should we be doing about it?

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg









RESPONSIBILITY

BY MR BIFFO

ITV boss Michael Grade isn't exactly known for holding back with an opinion. Indeed, he comes across as the sort of bloke who automatically assumes he's right about everything. What makes him particularly irritating is that more often than not he is right.

By the time Grade – then at the BBC – inherited Doctor Who it was scraping along with the lowest ratings in the series' history. Budgets had been slashed to the point where whole episodes were being set in a local park, and the best actor they could afford was a man off of Jigsaw.

The show's reputation was in space toilet, and Grade felt he had to act. He took a razor blade to almost a quarter of a century of BBC tradition, and cut the malignant Time Lord from the schedules. In the face of an overwhelming media outcry Grade held firm, and refused to recommission the series.

> Nobody ever seems to come up with a very good justification for why games have to be violent in the first place

As I write this, Grade has just addressed an audience of television industry bigwigs at a Royal Television Society conference. Speaking in response to a speech from John Riccitiello – chief executive of EA – Grade weighed in on the current debate about videogame violence.

Indeed, Grade laughed in the face of Riccitiello's ludicrous assertion that games are unfairly demonised by the media. Riccitiello argued that games are no more violent than many films or TV shows. Grade wasted little time in kicking the kneecaps off of Riccitiello's claim, describing videogames as existing in a "moral vacuum".

Grade's position was that TV had a far stronger moral standpoint than videogames, because it's able to contextualise its content within a dramatic narrative. Riccitiello was subsequently forced to concede that games' ability to tell stories within a strong moral framework was still in its infancy. You don't say, Johnny-Boy?

You have to feel for the EA boss; he really doesn't have a bloody leg-stump to stand on when it comes to defending the content of violent videogames. Frankly, when it comes to the most extreme videogames, they're pretty much indefensible. I'm not saying *Manhunt 2* deserved to be banned in the UK, but videogame violence simply isn't the same thing as TV and movie violence. There's a universe of difference between being an active, firstperson participant in acts of virtual violence to watching violent acts carried out within the context of a story.

It's an argument as old as the industry itself, but nobody ever seems to come up with a very good justification for why games have to be violent in the first place. Since that first shot was fired in *SpaceWar*, games have portrayed abstract violent behaviour in a way that lets the player define his or her own moral framework.

I strongly suspect that John Riccitiello knows this, but also knows which side his bread is buttered. Lose the violence from all videogames, and chances are you lose a big wedge of profits. And with them your job.

Let's face it, many games exist purely to let us indulge the darker areas of our psyches. Admittedly, plenty of games feature acts of violence with you in the role of the good guy – Heroic Cop versus Drug Dealers, or Brave American versus Evil Arabs – but there are an increasing number of games where that moral line isn't so much as blurred as eviscerated with a rusty screwdriver.

I have a friend who has played through all of the *Grand Theft Auto* games without killing a single civilian (he also refused to harvest any of the Little Sisters in *BioShock* – a game that attempts to guilt trip you into making the positive moral choice, but doesn't force you to), but I strongly suspect he's in the minority.

I don't mind admitting that I enjoy going on the occasional pretend gun rampage. I don't think I've suffered from exposure to such games, but then I'm not some screwed-up American teen with access to his daddy's gun closet. I can put down the joypad, and walk away safe in the knowledge that it hasn't done me any harm (short of making me want to slaughter the occasional cat, or smother my parents).

Rather than getting on the defensive every time some Tory toff or TV bigwig starts aiming their hammer blows at the forehead of our industry, isn't it about time we all grew up a bit and said 'fair enough'? Instead of denying that violent games are a bad thing, let's just embrace it in a responsible fashion, and move on.

We all know that videogames aren't to blame for all of society's ills – of course it seems churlish to target popular culture at all when our own leaders seem gripped with a sort of bloodlust these days – but sooner or later we're going to have to accept that videogames are a scapegoat, and probably always will be.

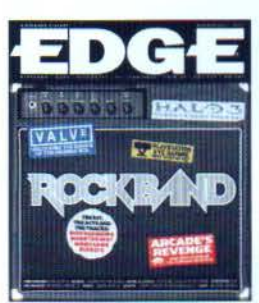
They're never going to leave us alone, so let's work with the legislators to keep these games on the market, but out of the hands of kids. Admittedly, we all know they won't stay out of the hands of kids, but showing a bit more willing might get them off our backs.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Illustration: tstokes

Inbox



Issue 181



ONLINE OFFLINE

Mostly nonsense, actually, from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Guess the scores in the next **Edge** – prize omg
The Orange Box: 10
Rock Band: 9
Super Mario Galaxy: 9
Guitar Hero III: 7
Ratchet & Clank Future: 7
ohms

The range will be 5, with a median of 6, a mode of 7 and a mean of 6.1 (recurring).
the daddy

The Orange Box: 10
Knight

I predict this post will be in Online Offline.
freethinker

Virtua Fighter 5: 10
Nights: 10
Ghost Squad: 10
Crazy Taxi Fare Wars: 10
PSU Ambition of the Illuminus: 10
Mario and Sonic at the Olympics: 10
Sonic Rivals 2: 10
Sonic confirmed for *Smash Bros*: 10
Fact.
Sega Kidd

Having read the article 'Saturday night at the movies' in **E**179, I felt that an important distinction had been glossed over. While I agree emphatically that movie tie-ins tend to be bland, repetitive and generic, there has still been a select few that have stood out. For every *ET* there is an *Escape From Butcher Bay*, for every *Transformers* there is a *KOTOR*. The distinction that needs to be identified here is whether the game follows a film directly, or rather is linked in to the ethos and lore of a film and its background/context.

"A film is viewed externally, voyeuristically. A game, by contrast, exists to be interacted with. The player must feel that they are writing their own story"

It seems to me that it is a futile gesture to try and base a game specifically on a movie, as it goes against the fundamental distinction that should exist between games and films. A film is viewed externally, voyeuristically. A game, by contrast, exists to be interacted with. The player must feel that they are writing their own story as they go, and that their actions are actually having an effect on the ultimate outcome.

In basing a game directly on a movie, the storyline is not only set in stone, but it is usually known to the player before they have even turned on the power. In this position the gamer is no longer playing the game but merely observing it.

The two options then left to a game designer are to make a rigid, by-the-numbers game with no surprises and no freedom for the player, or to add in some alternatives and changes to the original plotline. Unfortunately, the second will only ever succeed in alienating the core audience for which it was intended. Of course, the hidden third option is to go down the *Star Wars: Battlefront* route, allowing the player to write their own story within a universe with which they are familiar. That is why *Lord Of The Rings Online* is more likely to succeed and less likely to end up in a landfill site in New Mexico.
Howell Davies

Very true – games need to be allowed to be games. A Nintendo DS Lite shall be dispatched.



Letter of the month wins a DS Lite

I recommend Conor Lowry (Inbox, **E**180) does a little more research into Microsoft's Surface, as it has nothing to do with the console wars. In fact it's nothing like the Wii's Remote or the EyeToy. Rather, it's a touchscreen computer built into a coffee table using the multitouch technology to allow multiple simultaneous points of contact with the interface.

Gates describes it as 'video recognition' as it uses a projector and an infrared camera in tandem to display the GUI and map the points of interaction. The 'connected entertainment' concept appears to relate to the GUI's fluid wifi docking capabilities for wifi-enabled digital cameras and personal media players; allowing Zune's wifi a more thorough workout. It's certainly not the 360's successor. How could it be? The Xbox's size was a problem, and this thing's the size of a table!

Units are currently only available to companies for the next year or two, so unless you pop into a Spearmint Rhino you probably won't see one any time soon. Of course if you really want to, you can go to multitouch.nl, and make a similar unit yourself for a fraction of the cost. That's what I'm doing, because, well – *StarCraft* with multitouch? Just think of how many actions per second all ten fingers could achieve!
Jonny Sanger

I decided about lunchtime yesterday that I couldn't take any more of this egotistic ballyhoo. Leaving Game, where my eyes were assaulted by a wall of posters, I wandered past a number of Master Chiefs in Virgin next to a *Halo*-themed 360, beyond which lay a dozen posters at HMV advertising limited-edition preorder cards, four *Halo* displays at Gamestop and an advert for the launch party at midnight.

This kind of aggressive marketing is not new to videogames, I grant you, but three trailers, a documentary on Brute AI and a documentary on a trailer is just plain obscene. As is getting an advertising slot during the Superbowl or pushing for a $200 million movie budget, for that matter.

But could this self-indulgence merely be supply and demand? The hype reflects the public's cravings, right? *Halo* sold five million copies,



ollowed by eight million for *Halo 2*. The former figure has been matched y equally excellent titles such as *Twilight Princess*, *Mario Sunshine* nd *FFX*. The latter has been surpassed y *Mario 64*, *Half-Life* and *Rayman*. ven their combined sales are utshone by *Nintendogs*.

The collective Bungie ego retentiously sees itself as worthy of his hype. Don't get me wrong. I loved *Halo*. I loved *Halo 2*. I will love *Halo 3*. ut I love a lot of other, better, games.
Kyle



Halo 3 has enjoyed perhaps the biggest promotional campaign of any videogame to date, but the scale of its marketing, suggests Kyle, is simply not proportional to its quality

that we're hardly ever able to sit down with a game at preview stage and see all that it has to offer. We do endeavour to talk about concerns we have over potential failings wherever possible, but perhaps we just need to take an even harder line all round. Hey, maybe we should've scored *BioShock* 6/10, not 8/10. What do you reckon?

I'm starting to lose faith in game journalism. It doesn't seem to nake any sense any more. We are resented each month a brand new ame promising to revolutionise our eloved medium. Some of these even ppear out of the blue to make it to the ront cover (*Mirror's Edge*, *Fracture*, *The Outsider*). This engagement to eep our hopes up is maintained all

"Aggressive marketing is not new to videogames, I grant you, but three trailers, a documentary on Brute AI and a documentary on a trailer is just obscene"

hrough the countless interviews, eatures and previews during the evelopment of the game. However, nce the time comes to review the ame in question, then we get to see different policy.

Personally, I find it harder and arder to read all your previews or eatures. Maybe if your editorial ommitment was maintained until the inal score, it wouldn't be so hard to rust you. And please don't tell me that t's solely the game that turns out to be ntirely objectively disappointing. Games like *BioShock* or *Heavenly Sword* can be both considered as either tmospheric masterpieces or short, epetitive remakes. And it can be totally onfusing, especially after having layed and finished both, to see why ou finally decide to encourage one nd not the other.
Philippe Sélévol

You really don't believe it's tricky to evelop a fixed critical opinion of a ame that's unfinished? The truth is

So, *Crysis* looms on the horizon. It's all right for you guys with your banks of Freon-cooled digi-brains, humming away in the depths of **Edge** Towers – some of us are having trouble just getting *Defcon* to run on our geriatric rigs. A *Crysis*-capable computer? That's a grand of upgrades to my old machine – that's a lot of commitment in itself, and then there's the hours spent installing drivers and coaxing it all to work again properly. And then, just like the last upgrade, it's basically obsolete within a couple of years in as far as cutting-edge gaming is concerned.

But you know what? It is actually worth it. Just. I don't want to bash out the usual arguments, such as that old favourite: the PC is so much more than a gaming machine. For most people 'so much more' is word-processing and watching YouTube, and you don't need Deep Thought for that. But simply as a gaming machine, the PC offers something you can't (yet) get on a console: the mod scene. Your Valve article last month highlighted just how valuable it is, and the consoles are only just getting wise to user-generated content. What you can access through the 360 and PS3 is still massively limited in contrast to the PC – which is where we got the first version of *Team Fortress*, *Counter-Strike* and so many other brilliant mods, expansions and levels. You can bet that the mod scene will churn out levels for *TF2* and *Portal* that will extend the life of both games to an almost indefinite length.

Until consoles are as open to fiddling as the PC, PC gaming will always have a unique selling point that goes some considerable way to justifying the heavy price tag. So you can rejoice as you thrash around in the entrails of your PC with a can of squirty air, or as you lever off another fried BIOS, or as you beat your head against impenetrable internet communities, trying to discover reliable information about codecs, drivers and patches. It's all worth it. Right?
Sean Miller

Right. But there is a certain pleasure in knowing you can put a game in an Xbox 360 and it'll work, straight off, every time. Oh. Hold on... How many red lights is bad again?

F

Topic: Manhunt 2 still banned in UK
Any of you in the UK who were still hoping to simulate hacking off people's testicles with a Wii remote are going to have to manage without. The BBFC have again rejected the latest cut of *Manhunt 2* (which received an M rating in the US when resubmitted earlier this year). The BBFC site simply states R (for rejected) at present, with no particular justification offered beyond that. Personally, I couldn't care less, but given how irritated some of you got first time round...
tin robot

I know this is the wrong forum to say this, but has anyone considered that the BBFC may well be totally justified in refusing to allow a 'bleak', 'callous' and 'casually sadistic' game on to the market?
darthjim

A lot of people have played it (due to the leaked beta) and have stated it isn't as bad as the hype makes out.
Dark Soldier

What I object to with banning it is that as usual it is the nanny state telling us what we can and can't do – I should be able to make up my own mind. I do accept the valid points about interactivity, but where does it end? This plays into the Daily Mail's hands – if I want to buy it I should have the choice to. There is no proven link between violence and games and from all your arguments, ban *GTA*, and a host of other games. Freedom of speech shouldn't be infringed.
stadhart

I take you're it cool with inflammatory religious remarks, bigoted propaganda in the media, porn on daytime TV (actually, no, wait, that one's OK), racist chanting at football matches, holocaust denial, etc, 'cause you shouldn't infringe free speech, right, OK, right?
TheConge

I'll take the inflammatory religious remarks and porn on daytime TV, please. You can keep the rest.
harkon

Angela Brown (Inbox, **E**181) wrote about *BioShock* as though she's never played the game before. Out of all the arguments to make about giving *BioShock* eight out of ten instead of the big nine or ten favoured by other mags, she complains that the world of Rapture is a lot more interactive than **Edge** gave it credit for. But the world of Rapture never feels real.

You just don't associate the Splicers with those sad audio recordings. The boring Big Daddies and the Little Sisters, who all look the same, feel as though they are not actual monsters but people who've been paid to walk around, make creepy noises and try not to look bored.

Where are the *Shadow Of The Colossus*-style duels we were promised – the awesome battles that would tear the entire city apart? What happened to the idea of a beautiful nightmare where the monsters couldn't give a damn if you bothered to show up, but kept their mad world running all the same?

Bungie never made any promises

about some of the best AI ever shown in a game, but you don't even need to spend a long time with the new *Halo* to know that the combat there is truly magnificent. It flows like a dream. *Halo 3*'s enemies don't just skulk around somewhere and wait to die. Discussion and debate is fine, but all this arguing over scores makes us forget that we should just enjoy games for what they are, not what we dream them to be.
Cat B

OK, Cat, it's time for you to come over here and marry us now.



Topic: Virtual Boy for the win!

I'm scrounging around for batteries (to avoid going to the shop) as I want to play a few games on this classic system. I have the VB system with *Mario Tennis, Wario Land, Vertical Force, Red Alarm, Mario Clash,* and some Kemco Japanese baseball game for which I can't read the name but I know it's the '95 edition. If the system makes me go blind, I can't think of any better way to go.
Toadwarrior

For everyone else, reasonably reasonable emulation exists.
Mr. Brooks

I did try it on emulation, and it was amazingly awful.
Dark Soldier

Pretty much the same as actually using the thing then.
Diluted Dante

In my youth I had much more time available to save the world. My skills allowed me to fight evil whether it be in the depths of space, on the surface of a distant planet, or even on our very own Earth. I also had time to win Grand Prix races, build civilisations from scratch and earn gold at the Olympics. Now, however, being in my 30s, the harsh realities of life mean that I no longer have as much time on my hands to complete these important tasks. However good the games are, I have a tendency to only play so far through them before drifting away and being distracted by another game or (worse still) another aspect of Real Life. Because of this, I have several unfinished missions in which I have not yet saved the world.

The kingdom of Hyrule won't be able to sleep easily until I've helped Link restore peace to the land (he's waiting for me to help him continue his quest in both *Twilight Princess* and *Ocarina Of Time* at the moment, so he's probably pretty peeved), the Master Chief has nearly finished his mission in *Halo 2* but just needs my guidance with the last boss fight, and I've got God knows how many more quests to complete in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. There's a whole continent of people and creatures waiting for me in that game, either to aid them or blade them.

It's a big responsibility playing these games. You have to commit. I'd like to save the world, but can only do so I've got the time.
Ben Bulbeck

OK, that's enough letters about no longer having the time to dedicate to gaming. Let's hear from those of you with tales to tell of marathon sessions that recall the olden days of shutting yourselves inside darkened rooms for days on end and subsisting on nothing but Pot Noodles and spiders. We'll dig out some prizes for the most extreme (truthful) accounts.

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